



## The Aggression Cycle: How to Manage Angry Classroom Outbursts

Anger is complicated, especially in classrooms. Anger is classified as a secondary emotion, one that is most often set off by more primary emotional responses such as shame, embarrassment, frustration, powerlessness, or fright (Bartholomew & Simpson, 2005). Anger does play a potentially positive role in our emotional lives, as it can create a feeling of power that energizes the individual to take action rather than remain passive. However, anger can also be counterproductive, particularly when a student habitually responds with hostility and aggression in the face of the everyday frustrations and challenges typically found in school settings.

Teachers know that, when a student experiences a significant anger episode, that anger can quickly escalate to aggression, resulting in classroom disruption and potential safety concerns. Though outbursts of anger can appear unpredictable and chaotic, however, they usually follow an identifiable pattern called the “aggression cycle” (Reilly et al., 1994; Videbeck, 2014). This cycle has five phases: (1) Trigger; (2) Escalation; (3) Crisis; (4) Recovery; and (5) Post-Crisis. How a teacher chooses to respond to an episode of significant student anger or aggression should vary, depending on what phase of the aggression cycle the student happens to be in when that the instructor intervenes.

The table below describes the 5 phases of the aggression cycle and provides advice for how a teacher should respond at each phase. This handout can be a useful tool for educators as they develop behavior-intervention plans for students with serious anger or aggression issues. It is especially important to remember that the aggression cycle rewards **proactive** intervention: the teacher who manages to eliminate an anger trigger (Phase 1) or to successfully defuse student anger (Phase 2) can head off a major outburst or aggression episode.

Aggression Cycle: Guide for Teachers (Reilly et al., 1994; Videbeck, 2014)	
Phase	What to Do
<p><b>PHASE 1: TRIGGER.</b> The student has a negative experience or event to which they respond with anger. This initiates the aggression cycle.</p> <p>The student may first experience an event or situation that embarrasses, shames, frustrates, or frightens them; anger then follows as a secondary emotional response.</p>	<p><b>PHASE 1: Manage or Eliminate the Trigger Event.</b> The teacher's primary goal during this initial phase is to address the trigger itself by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>responding to the event.</i> If the trigger experience or event has already occurred, the teacher moves quickly to correct the situation or address the student's needs so that their initial primary negative emotion (e.g., embarrassment or frustration) does not spiral into anger. For example, the instructor might provide immediate help to the student struggling with an in-class assignment or reprimand and move the seat of a peer who is teasing that student.</li> <li>• <i>eliminating the trigger.</i> When possible, the teacher identifies in advance and takes steps to prevent those triggers that can lead to student anger. For example, if a student often responds with embarrassment and then anger when directed to read aloud in front of others, the instructor might revise reading tasks to remove this performance requirement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHASE 2: ESCALATION.</b> The student shows visible signs of irritation or hostility, such as looking flushed or tense, grumbling, or muttering under their breath. The student's level of agitation increases and may include arguing, leaving their seat, and refusing to respond to peers or adults.</p> <p>While not visible to observers, the student is likely to be preoccupied with</p>	<p><b>PHASE 2: Interrupt the Anger.</b> The teacher interacts with the student in a calm and non-judgmental manner. The instructor takes steps to reduce the student's level of anger, through such strategies as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>pulling the student aside for a conference.</i> The teacher asks the student open-ended questions to determine what precipitated the anger event and then explores a solution to the problem.</li> <li>• <i>directing the student to use relaxation techniques.</i> The teacher prompts the student to use one or more strategies to calm themselves, such as taking deep breaths and releasing slowly or counting backward from 10.</li> </ul>



<p>their anger at this point, interfering with their ability to comply with rules and respond rationally to adult requests or directives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>removing the student from the setting.</i> The teacher directs the student to take a brief (non-punitive) break from the setting (e.g., moving to a quiet part of the classroom; visiting a counselor).</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHASE 3: CRISIS.</b> The student's behavior intensifies, posing a potential risk of safety to self and/or others.</p> <p>The student may express anger through disruptive, confrontational verbal behavior such as insults, threats, arguments, or confrontation. Or the student's behavior may include physical aggression toward property or other people.</p> <p>At this stage, the student's anger and other strong emotions may limit or overwhelm their ability to process language accurately and respond rationally.</p>	<p><b>PHASE 3: Maintain Safety and Defuse Anger.</b> The teacher works toward 3 goals, to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ensuring the safety of the student and others.</i> The teacher takes immediate steps to keep the student, peers, and adults in the vicinity safe that may include summoning additional adult support or removing the student or peers from the room. The student remains under constant adult supervision during this stage.</li> <li>• <i>preventing further anger escalation.</i> The teacher avoids actions likely to intensify the student's anger and aggression, such as yelling at the student, issuing threats or ultimatums, or engaging in arguments about 'who is right'.</li> <li>• <i>calming the student.</i> The teacher makes a conscious effort to reduce the level of the student's anger and arousal, such as speaking in a calm voice, respecting the student's personal space, and communicating that student and adults will work together to resolve the problem in a positive way. Because the student's heightened emotional state may reduce their ability to engage in and comprehend dialog, the teacher (and other adults) keep their statements simple and short, check for student understanding, and repeat key statements as often as needed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHASE 4: RECOVERY.</b> The student regains control of their emotions and behavior.</p> <p>As the student transitions from a state of anger and high arousal to normal functioning, the recovery process might include periods of crying, emotional withdrawal, expressions of remorse, or even sleeping.</p>	<p><b>PHASE 4: Support Student Recovery.</b> The teacher or other adults maintain a supportive environment to more rapidly help the student to regain composure and self-control.</p> <p>During the recovery phase, adults refrain from attempts to analyze, assign blame, or impose disciplinary consequences for the behavioral incident—as such actions run the risk of prolonging or rekindling the anger state.</p>
<p><b>PHASE 5: POST-CRISIS.</b> The student has fully recovered control of emotions and behavior.</p>	<p><b>PHASE 5: Engage in Reflection and Problem-Solving.</b> The teacher conferences with the student to discuss the incident and develop a future response plan. The tone of the meeting is positive and focused on preventing future incidents, not on assigning blame. The meeting includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>analysis of the behavioral incident.</i> The teacher and student discuss the incident, identifying what triggered the event and how the student responded.</li> <li>• <i>creating a plan for future incidents.</i> The teacher and student develop and write out a plan for how that student might respond proactively when faced with future situations with similar triggers.</li> <li>• <i>providing student training as needed.</i> If the teacher determines that the student needs specific training to manage emotions or respond to challenging events more appropriately, the Post-Crisis phase should include that training. For example, an instructor who notes that a student has difficulty in identifying when they are angry may provide training in how the student can use an 'anger meter' to gain awareness of and self-monitor their anger levels.</li> </ul>



## References

Bartholomew, N.G., & Simpson, D. D. (2005). *Understanding and reducing angry feelings*. Texas Institute of Behavioral Research at Texas Christian University. Retrieved from <http://libr.tcu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/TMA05Aug-Anger.pdf>

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Videbeck, S. L. (2014). *Psychiatric-mental health nursing* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkens.