

# JUST TRY AND MAKE ME: How To Successfully Deal with Anger and Confrontational Behaviour



## An article by Dave Vizard

Many of the students with whom we work can carry a lot of baggage and come from very turbulent backgrounds. Often when they feel threatened they can become very confrontational. A lack of nurture and an absence of appropriate modelling of behaviour by parents and carers in early years mean that they do not have the skills to manage difficult situations. Often the hard wiring that develops in those early years means that messages that the brain receives are sent immediately from the router centre, the amygdala to the reptilian part of the brain. This is the part of the brain that first developed and is a primitive part of the brain which gives off a fight or flight response to situations. When it is triggered blood moves away from the brain to the limbs which are required for survival. This means that students can give an extreme reaction to events that do not warrant such a response.

When working with students it is useful to try and get them to reflect on what triggers such anger and conflict. The triggers will vary from student to student. It is also helpful to students to recognise the signs that they have prior to the angry or confrontational outburst. To do this we need to, with their permission model their behaviour. Some signs might be:

- Clenching their fists and banging them on the table
- Kicking out with their legs
- Start to perspire more
- Become agitated and fidgety
- Breathe faster
- Tense muscles
- Become distractible

Working with students we can develop a range of strategies for them to use when they think they are becoming angry and confrontational. These might include:

- Controlled breathing – taking deep breaths, expanding the stomach outwards as they breath in through the nose on a count of 4, holding breath for 3 and exhaling through the mouth on 4. This pattern should be repeated 20 times.
- Visualising a location that is special to them (favourite holiday location). This will anchor a student in a happier time and will help the student to relax.
- Encourage the student to use progressive muscle relaxation – tensing and then relaxing muscles from head to toe.
- Using stress balls or another object to squeeze to release tension.
- Counting to 10 before responding and using an imaginary pause control in their head to stop an immediate response.
- Using selective listening – tactical use of blocking out some things being said by another person that may be hurtful.
- Distraction techniques where you have a store of thoughts you can use to distract the brain.
- Have a range of positive self talk to use when faced with an angry person. For example 'I am the only person who can make me angry' or 'an angry person says things they don't mean in the heat of the moment'.
- Get them to change the negative feelings that they might have. Often the most volatile students have low levels of self-esteem and fragile egos so if someone gives them a quick sideways glance they

believe that this is the most provocative act. We need to develop alternative positive views on why the glance was given.

- When hurtful statements are made towards them get them to utilize a Star Trek style force shield to deflect those comments.
- You could help students to develop appropriate responses through role play. Using this approach will help students to become more assertive.

It is also important to have a range of strategies to use when faced with angry and confrontational behaviour from students:

- It is important that we do not take things personally and avoid having an emotional reaction. Put up a wall between yourself and what the student is saying / doing.
- When faced with someone who is angry it is important that we try to remain calm, acknowledge their feelings and admit that they may have a point.
- Show respect towards the student and listen actively to what they are saying. A period of silence following the student's comments shows that you are reflecting on what they have said and that you are taking them seriously.
- Respond to their feelings rather than their actions. Get them to talk it out.
- Avoid aggressive, threatening and domineering behaviour.
- Using calm words is key.
- Try to remain solution focused.
- Humour can be useful to ease tension.
- Try to establish rapport with the learner (more on this elsewhere in this edition).
- Using attention diverters with distractions real or imagined can be useful.
- Remember positioning is key – we all have a 50cm personal space bubble, a comfort zone, around us and when we are angry this space is bigger. Respect this and stand further away from an angry student.
- Standing alongside or at right angles to a student can reduce the tension and avoid excessive eye contact.
- Avoid trying to out shout a student. When they are angry they will speak louder and we try to outdo them and speak even louder. This upward spiral can soon get out of control.

**Article taken from:**

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