

Managing Severe Behavior in Children with Autism

In autism, severe behavior problems can take the form of unusual, aggressive, and sometimes injurious behaviors. Such behaviors tend to isolate the child and make people working with the child fear for their personal safety. Leslie Sinclair (2006) defines life-threatening behaviors as extreme self-injury, elopement (running away or darting), pica (eating non-foods), biting, eye-gouging, head-butting, and rumination (regurgitating partially digested food and chewing it again). Behaviors that are severe but not life-threatening include tantrums and property destruction.

To ensure the child's safety and the safety of others, you must address severe behaviors. First establish safety procedures. Then identify the process that leads to the severe behavior or tantrum. Myles and Southwick (2005) describe the process of escalating tension followed by an explosion of anger and then a gradual decline of feeling as "the rage cycle." They describe the three parts of the rage cycle as the Rumbling Stage, the Rage Stage, and the Recovery Stage.

1. Rumbling Stage

In this stage, the child may exhibit warning behaviors. Verbal warning behaviors may include humming, groaning, making noises, swearing, speaking in a loud voice, or anxious repeating of words or phrases. Nonverbal warning behaviors may include rocking, fidgeting, grinding teeth, closing eyes, and wringing/flapping hands.

The goal during this stage is to defuse the rumbling and prevent escalation to the Rage Stage. Identify effective strategies for the child. Proceed with caution since some strategies can escalate the problem behavior for some children. Here are some suggestions.

Verbal Strategies

- Ask the child to move to a different location.
- Talk with the child about a special interest or hobby.
- Redirect with verbal problem solving and visual supports, such as drawings or cartoons.
- State the problem or rule (e.g., "It's hard to wait").

Nonverbal Strategies

- Move toward the child or stand by the child without touching him.
- Use a signal, such as maintaining eye contact or flipping a light switch, to communicate to the child that the behavior is inappropriate.
- Gently touch the child on the arm, shoulder, or leg.
- Allow the child to go to a "safe space" to take a break.
- Encourage the child to check the schedule, review the behavior plan, or review a familiar social story.

- Take a walk with the child. Remain silent and let the child speak without fear of reprisal.

Unless an adult intervenes in the Rumbling Stage, the child's behavior will escalate to the Rage Stage.

2. Rage Stage

In this stage, the child's behaviors are often explosive, and/or injurious. This stage is often described as a tantrum or meltdown. Behaviors include screaming, biting, hitting, kicking, head banging, throwing objects, running away, withdrawing into silence, or self-injuries.

The goals during this stage are to protect the child and others from injury and to move the child into the Recovery Stage. Have a plan in place for the Rage Stage. Any intervention should address the safety of the child and others in the room, the protection of property, moving the child to a safe area, getting help, removing the audience, and providing an exit strategy. Note: Check your school district's policy on physical restraint and follow written procedures for its use. The steps of the plan should include:

- A description of the behaviors that indicate the child is escalating toward a crisis
- Intervention(s) you will use that are matched to each step of the escalating behavior
- Personnel who will react during the Rage Stage, including a plan for training the staff involved
- A plan for record keeping and monitoring the plan's success

3. Recovery Stage

Unless you give the child a chance to recover, he risks entering the rage cycle again. During the Recovery Stage, the child may be sleepy, sullen, or apologetic. Allow the child to sleep or withdraw to a safe area. Support this process by remaining calm and not discussing the rage behavior.

According to Myles and Southwick (2005), there's a pattern to the rage cycle. Recognizing the three stages in the cycle and their precedents will allow you to prevent and/or better manage breakdowns that do occur.

Adapted from The Source® for Behavior Management in Autism by Pam Britton Reese and Nena C. Challenner

Copyright © 2006 LinguSystems, Inc.

Click on FREE Downloads at linguisystems.com to print this page.

Myles, B.S., & Southwick, J. (2005). *Asperger syndrome and difficult moments: Practical solutions for tantrums, rage and meltdowns* (2nd ed.). Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

Sinclair, L.V. (June, 2006). *Understanding and managing severe behavior in school settings*. Lecture at Milestones: Education & Training for the Autism Community, Cleveland, OH.