

PAUSE: Managing Behavioral or Emotional Crises in Students with Extensive Support Needs

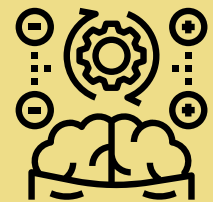
P

Protect safety of all



A

Assess antecedents and behavior



U

Use de-escalation strategies



S

Support regulation



E

Engage team



Students with extensive support needs may experience behavioral or emotional crises when stress overwhelms their ability to communicate or self-regulate. This tipsheet outlines a structured, trauma-informed approach to responding to crisis situations that prioritizes safety, regulation, and understanding behavior as communication. The PAUSE framework provides practical guidance for supporting students and adults through moments of escalation while promoting long-term prevention and consistency.

P: Protect Safety of All

Safety is the immediate priority during emotional or behavioral crises.

When a student is experiencing intense emotional distress, the priority is safety for the student, peers, adults, and others in the room. In moments of crisis, students with extensive support needs may not be able to think clearly, communicate effectively, or regulate their behavior. This is not willful misbehavior – it is a stress response.

High stress can activate the brain's survival system, limiting access to reasoning and language or communication ability. When adults focus first on safety and reducing the perceived threat, the nervous system can begin to calm down. Until this happens, engagement is not a realistic expectation for a student in crisis who struggles with self-regulation and has extensive support needs.

What protecting safety may look like:

- Removing potentially dangerous objects
- Creating physical space (e.g., room divider)
- Quietly clearing others from the area without drawing attention

Adults should:

- Use calm body language
- Move slowly
- Speak in a low, steady voice
- Implement a pre-taught safety signal or symbol

Remember:

- Safety comes before instruction and before consequences.
- Calm adult behavior helps calm student behavior.
- Preventative action is a sign of effective support, not failure.

A: Assess Antecedents and Behaviors

Behavior communicates unmet needs or stressors.

Once immediate safety is addressed, the next step is understanding what led to the behavior. Behavior does not occur randomly. Research consistently shows that behavior not only serves a purpose but also serves as communication. For students with significant support needs, distress is often triggered by environmental stressors, unmet needs, or difficulties with communication. By identifying patterns and triggers, adults can respond more effectively in the moment and make meaningful changes to prevent future crises.

Common antecedents may include:

- Tasks that exceed the student's current skill level
- Crowded, noisy, or unpredictable environments
- Changes or breaks in routine
- Unclear or misunderstood expectations
- Communication breakdowns
- Fatigue, anxiety, or frustration

Remember:

- Behavior is communication.
- Understanding patterns supports prevention.
- Assessment guides future support.

U: Use De-Escalation Strategies

De-escalation reduces emotional intensity and restores a sense of safety.

De-escalation strategies are used to slow down and reduce emotional intensity to prevent a situation from becoming unsafe. The goal is not to teach a lesson, correct behavior in the moment, or enforce consequences, but to help the student feel less overwhelmed so the escalation can slow down. During distress, the brain's stress response limits language processing, reasoning, and impulse control. Effective de-escalation often includes acknowledging the student's experience without trying to fix or argue it.

Adults can:

- Lower expectations and demands while remaining present and supportive
- Speak less and use a neutral tone
- Move slowly and predictably

When communicating with a student in distress:

- Use short, concrete phrases (no more than 3-4 words)
- Offer no more than two choices
- Stand at an angle rather than face-to-face
- Avoid prolonged eye contact
- Validate emotions without validating unsafe behavior

Environmental supports may include:

- Lowering noise
- Dimming lights
- Removing extra people from the room
- Allowing a student space from triggering situations
- Using silence or minimal interaction when appropriate

Remember:

- De-escalation strategies reduce nervous system overload.
- Calm, predictable adults support safety.
- Less demand can mean more regulation.

S: Support Regulation

Regulation support helps students return to a calm, organized state.

Even after escalation slows, students may need assistance regulating their body and emotions. Regulation is not always an independent skill, especially during or after distress. Some students benefit from Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), written communication, or predictable routines to help regulate. What works will vary by student and should be based on known needs, preferences, and past successes. When adults provide steady, calm support, the student's nervous system gradually stabilizes through a co-regulation process. Only once that regulation is restored can students reflect, problem-solve, or re-engage in learning.

Support may include:

- Access to a quiet or familiar place
- Movement
- Sensory input
- Visual supports
- Time with a trusted adult

Remember:

- Regulation comes before reflection.
- Support is a *need*, not a *reward*.
- Time and patience are essential.

E: Engage Team

Consistency across adults and environments builds safety and trust.

Students with extensive support needs rely on predictable responses across environments and people. Engaging the team ensures alignment with the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Behavior

Intervention Plan (BIP) and supports consistent implementation across settings. After a crisis, caregivers and educators should share observations, reflect on what was effective, and adjust supports based on patterns rather than isolated incidents.

Engaging the team includes:

- Sharing observations with relevant team members
- Reviewing IEP or BIP alignment
- Identifying patterns and prevention strategies
- Teaching coping skills during calm moments

Remember:

- Collaboration strengthens support.
- Focus on solutions, not blame.
- Reflection works best when everyone is calm.

References

- *Center on PBIS*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2026, from <https://www.pbis.org>
- Martel, C., & Cavanaugh, B. (2016). Preventing and Responding to Student Escalation: Combining De-Escalation Strategies and Function-Based Support. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*, 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.64546/jaasep.293>
- Meyer, K., Sears, S., Putnam, R., Phelan, C., Burnett, A., Warden, S., & Simonsen, B. (2021). Supporting Students With Disabilities With Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in the Classroom: Lessons Learned From Research and Practice. *Beyond Behavior*, 30(3), 169–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956211021801>
- Walker, V. L., Conradi, L. A., Strickland-Cohen, M. K., & Johnson, H. N. (n.d.). School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports and students with extensive support needs: A scoping review. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 69(1), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2022.2116232>
- Wasersztein, A. K., Tincani, M., Fruchtman, T., Travers, J. C., Kostin, K., Wallace, O., Gonçalves, B. F., Cook, B. G., & Dowdy, A. (2026). Systematic Review of Crisis Management Programs for Students With Disabilities. *Behavioral Disorders*, 01987429251410961. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01987429251410961>

This product was supported by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the ACL or HHS.

This product was authored by Camille Reynolds, M.F.A., M.A., Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) UCEDD trainee; Verity Rodrigues, Ph.D., Associate Director, VKC Mental Health Initiatives; and Nina Zuna, Ph.D., Associate Director, Texas Center for Disability Studies UCEDD. It may be distributed as is or at no cost. Photo by Adobe Stock. [Access additional free resources](https://vkc.vumc.org/printables) (vkc.vumc.org/printables).