



Teaching Coping Skills to Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

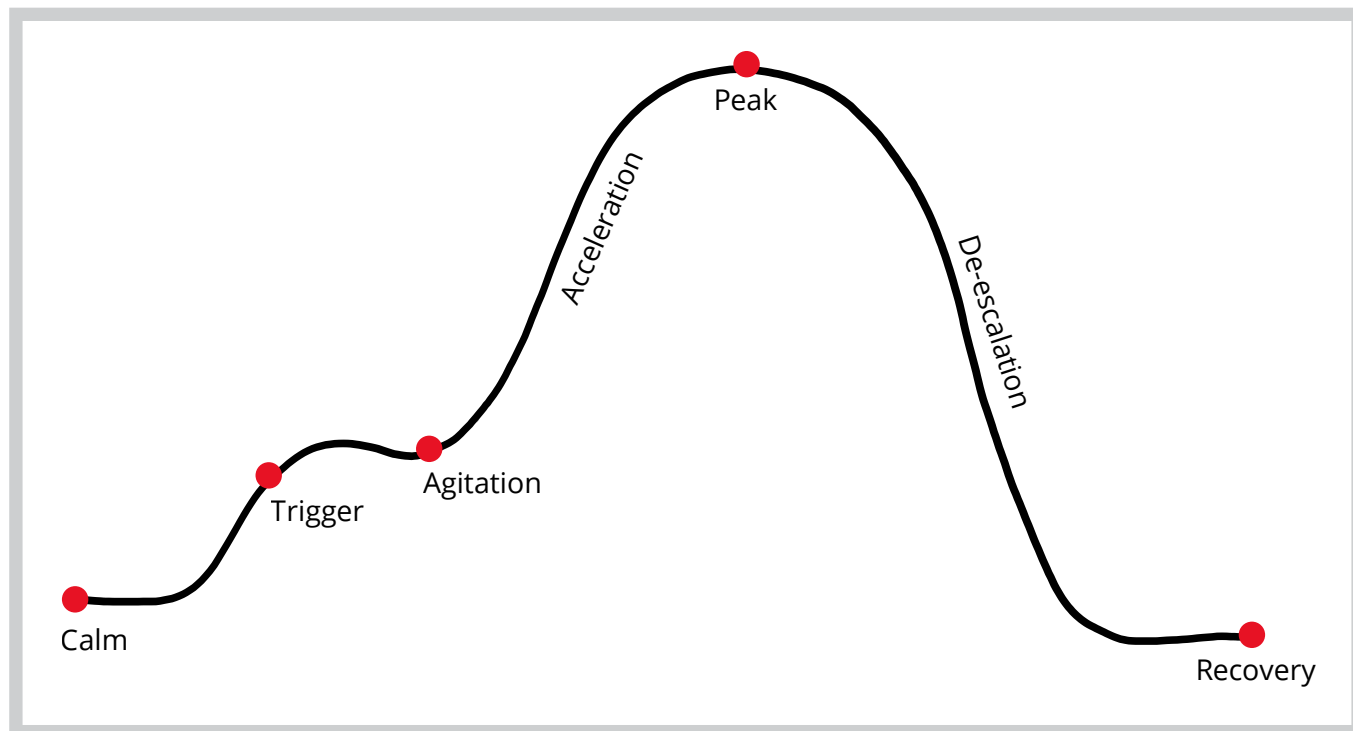
Coping Skills and Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the awareness and ability to manage one's emotions. Students face many stressors throughout the school day that may impact their emotions and contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety. Coping skills are tools that help students handle stress, problems, and strong feelings.

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) may need these skills to be **taught directly**. When coping skills are taught in simple steps and practiced often, students can use them in many places—at school, at home, and in the community (What Issues Connected to I/DD, 2022).

Before teaching coping skills, it's helpful to understand how behavior changes over time. This is called the **Acting Out Cycle**.

The Acting Out Cycle



The Acting Out Cycle shows how behavior can build up and eventually calm down again (IRIS Center, 2023). The common stages of the Acting Out Cycle are:

- Calm
- Trigger
- Agitation
- Acceleration
- Peak
- De-escalation
- Recovery

This tip sheet explains each stage and what teachers can do to support students.

Calm Phase

Description:

- Students are focused, cooperative, and able to learn.
- Their emotions are steady (regulated).
- **This is the best time to teach self-regulation and coping skills.** While some students with IDD may struggle with labeling their emotions, these skills can be explicitly taught, and students can engage in self-regulation strategies.

What to do:

- Teach coping strategies directly and explain why they help.
- Model the strategies and let students practice them frequently.
- Give feedback so students learn what works.
- Use visual supports or step-by-step guides for students who need them.

You can use the My Coping Skills Tool on page three to help students identify their triggers, calming strategies, and appropriate supports. Students should fill out as much as they can, with help from a trusted adult if needed. See the resources section at the end of the tip sheet for additional completed examples of the My Coping Skills Tool.

My Coping Skills Tool

Name:
Support Person (put N/A if not used):

Area/Prompt	Use symbols or words to fill in these boxes
Supports I feel calm when...	
Triggers I feel stressed when...	Environmental: Non-environmental:
Agitation When I am anxious/ stressed, I...	
Coping Strategies When I am anxious/ stressed, I can...	

Trigger & Agitation Phase

Description:

- A **trigger** is something that causes stress. Examples include loud noise, change in routine, and crowded places.
- **Agitation** is how the student reacts to the trigger. Examples include fidgeting, head turned down, pacing, and looking away.
- During this phase, students may show signs of being overwhelmed/dysregulated.
- This is **not** the time to teach new coping skills. Instead, prompt use of the coping skills the student learned during the calm phase.

What to do:

- Teachers should look for stressors and change the environment when possible. For example, dimming lights if the student is sensitive to brightness.
- Teachers should also notice early signs of agitation to help prevent behavior from escalating. When signs appear, the student and teacher can look at the My Coping Skills Tool to remember what strategies to use.
- Step in early - **this is the most important time to respond/intervene to allow students the best opportunity to regulate their emotions and behaviors.**

Acceleration, Peak, De-escalation, and Recovery Phases

Description:

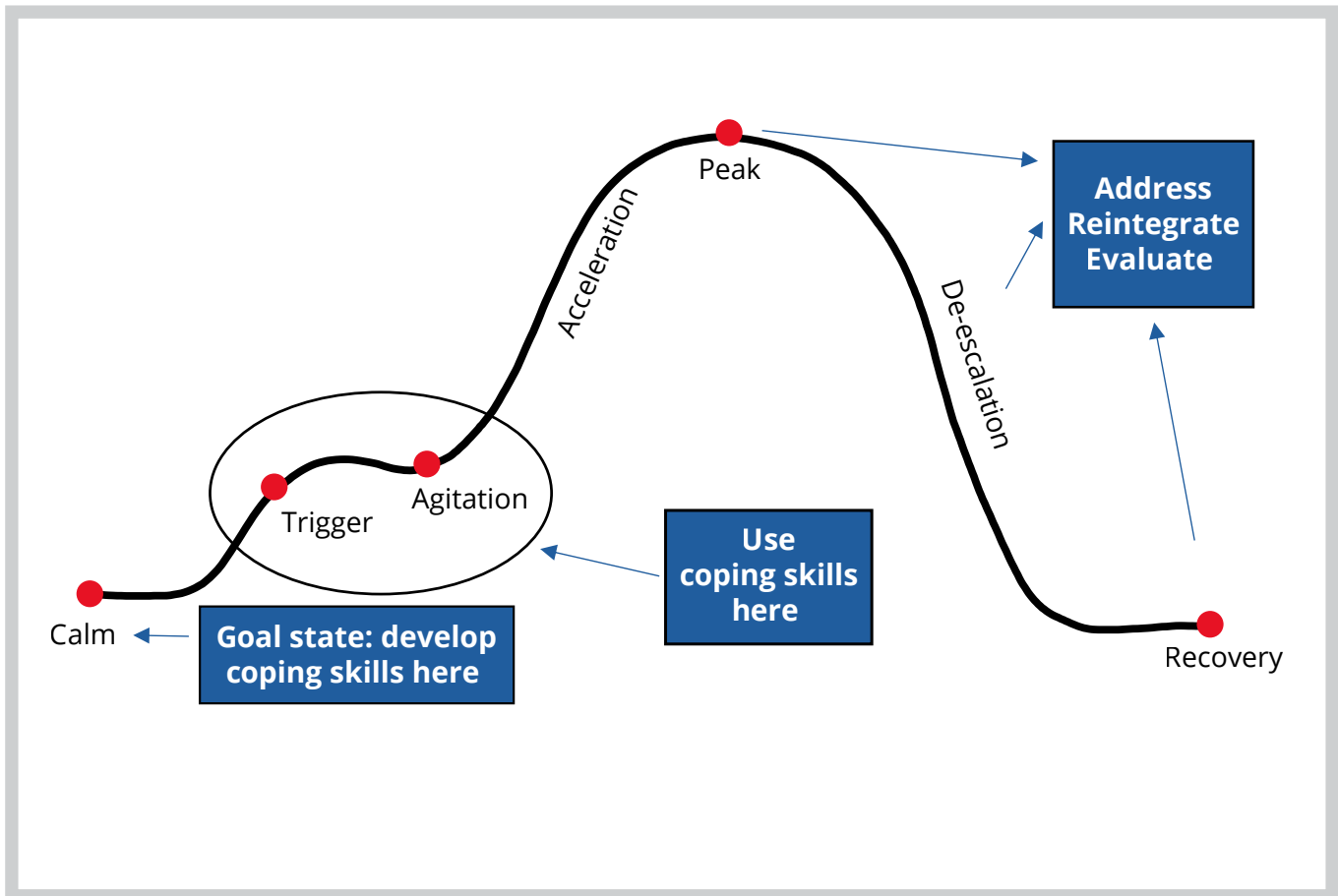
- **Acceleration:** During this phase, a student's behavior may start to escalate and be more intense than those during the agitation phase.
- **Peak:** During this phase, the student's behavior may disrupt the environment they are in.
- **Recovery:** After the peak of this behavior, behavior de-escalates. The student then enters the recovery phase. During this time, the student is calming down and may experience different emotions such as sadness, shame, embarrassment, or exhaustion.

What to do:

- **Acceleration:** Teachers can calmly prompt and redirect the student during this phase. Some students may return to the Calm phase.
- **Peak:** Address safety first. If the student has a [Behavior Intervention Plan](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/bip-sec/cresource/q1/p01/) (https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/bip-sec/cresource/q1/p01/) or a Behavior Support Plan, the educational team should immediately implement the strategies listed to ensure safety for the student, peers, staff, and property.
- **Recovery:** Help the student return to a simple, neutral activity and give the student time to fully recover. If appropriate and once the student is completely regulated, it may help to check in with the student about what worked, what didn't, and how to repair relationships if needed.

Summary

Coping skills help students handle stress and strong emotions. The Acting Out Cycle shows how behavior changes and when to provide support. Coping skills should be taught during the **Calm phase**, not during moments of stress. Tools like the **My Coping Skills Tool** help students and teachers identify triggers, early signs of stress, and coping strategies that work best.



My Coping Skills Tool Example 1

Name:	<i>Example Student 1</i>
Support Person (put N/A if not used):	

Area/Prompt	Use symbols or words to fill in these boxes
Supports I feel calm when...	<i>I know what comes next</i> <i>I have my blanket.</i> <i>It is quiet</i> <i>I work with my teacher or a familiar person</i>
Triggers I feel stressed when...	<i>Environmental:</i> • <i>It is too loud</i> • <i>It is too bright</i> <i>Non-environmental:</i> • <i>Changing classes/transitions</i> • <i>Work that is too hard</i>
Agitation When I am anxious/ stressed, I...	<i>Hum</i> <i>Fidget in my seat</i> <i>Speak louder than normal</i>
Coping Strategies When I am anxious/ stressed, I can...	<i>Use noise cancelling headphones</i> <i>Ask for help when I don't understand</i> <i>Update my visual schedule and use a timer for transitions</i>

My Coping Skills Tool Example 2

Name:	<i>Example Student 2</i>		
Support Person (put N/A if not used):			
Area/Prompt	Use symbols or words to fill in these boxes		
Supports I feel calm when...	 listen to music  use tablet		
Triggers I feel stressed when...	 too many people Environmental: Non-environmental:  being misunderstood  being ignored		
Agitation When I am anxious/ stressed, I...	 yell  hit head  cry		

Resources and References

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