

# HANDLING STUDENT FRUSTRATIONS

*How do I help students manage  
emotions in the classroom?*

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Hawker Brownlow Education

## The APA Method

*The elements of emotional intelligence—being aware of our feelings and handling disruptive emotions well, empathizing with how others feel, and being skillful in handling our relationships—are crucial abilities for effective living.*

*We should be teaching the basics of emotional intelligence in schools.*

—Daniel Goleman

Parents, students, administrators, the public at large: most people don't understand the kind of pressure teachers are under on a daily basis. They face multiple demands, such as

- Meeting students' unique academic needs.
- Raising student test scores.
- Mastering the constant stream of new technology.
- Keeping up with continually shifting district and administrative requirements, including implementation of new standards.

In addition to these challenges, classrooms are filled with constant shifts and changes as students struggle to manage their day-to-day social and emotional needs. Family

situations, peer relationships, and personal yearnings for acceptance and inclusion can, and often do, result in actions and reactions not easily dealt with or recognized. When students' frustrations erupt in the classroom, teachers need to be prepared to respond to them quickly and successfully. To that end, we have designed the Acknowledge/Process/Act (APA) method for helping you to create conditions that will result in better relationships with your students. Regardless of grade level, following the three steps of the method will result in higher student motivation and achievement:

- **Step 1: Acknowledge.** Help the student accept the situation, including his or her own reaction.
- **Step 2: Process.** As soon as time allows, help the student clarify what is actually taking place. Together with the student, come up with an action plan for moving forward.
- **Step 3: Act.** Help the student implement the action plan. This may sound simple, but it is possibly the most difficult and important step.

The APA process will help you to

- Handle everyday situations and emotional issues you encounter in your classroom.
- Implement strategies that can lead to a more peaceful, respectful, and productive learning environment.
- Understand how strongly negative emotions can override learning and sabotage academic goals.
- Identify triggers for emotional overload.

Our focus in these pages is on those students who function well most of the time, but who may temporarily be experiencing an emotional crisis—what we refer to as *hijacking*. When the brain is hijacked, students’ emotional reactions can take over their thinking and make learning difficult if not impossible. They may also act out in ways that puzzle, frustrate, and, yes, infuriate both teachers and classmates.

All too often, teachers must deal with open defiance from students who willfully ignore established rules and agreements. As one young teacher recently told us, “90 percent of my time is spent dealing with emotional issues that have nothing to do with what I am supposed to be teaching.” Most teachers still believe that they must manage and control how their students behave and learn. We believe strongly that educators should instead create positive and respectful relationships with students, but moving from control to collaboration is not easy.

## The Science Behind the Hijacked Brain

The limbic system of the brain reacts to any real or imagined crisis by directly sending energy to the brain’s survival system, which is in charge of securing the individual’s immediate survival. This is known as the “fight or flight” response, during which cortisol, the stress hormone, is released into

the bloodstream. As Daniel Goleman (2001), the author of *Emotional Intelligence*, says, “When cortisol levels are high, people make more errors, are more distracted, and can’t remember as well. Irrelevant thoughts intrude, and processing information becomes more difficult” (p. 76). The brain is commonly hijacked in this way when we are faced with such scenarios as

- Having to constantly make decisions.
- Needing to deal with frequent changes.
- Continually rushing to meet constant deadlines and other time pressures.
- Being unprepared to deal with personal conflicts and challenges.

## The Continuum of Emotional States

An emotional state is defined by the level of real or imagined threat that an individual senses. Bruce Perry (2003), a neuroscientist at the Trauma Center at Baylor University in Austin, Texas, has devised a continuum showing how emotions are tied to physiological states. Because emotions affect our physiologies, they help determine what parts of the brain are most active and accessible at a given moment. In rising order of intensity, Perry’s continuum of emotional

states is as follows: *calm*, *arousal*, *alarm*, and *fear*. Each of these states determines what areas of an individual's brain are predominantly active, how well or what kind of thinking an individual is capable of, and what kind of behavior can be expected:

- **Calm.** When we are calm, we can be engaged—we can plan, find solutions, and think creatively and abstractly. Creative and abstract thinking are essential for mastering strong emotions.
- **Arousal.** In this state of heightened vigilance, we tend to focus on such concrete aspects of learning as how much time is needed, how many words are required, and what information and procedures we need to recall. Unfortunately, most students and teachers spend the bulk of their days in this state, which is why schools tend toward an authoritarian approach to education; collaboration both creates and requires a calmer emotional state.
- **Alarm.** Once we are in a state of alarm, it is harder for us to control our emotions, and our thinking and learning become inflexible, reactive, and concrete. When we are alarmed, we are on autopilot—we no longer think, we react. Working with students in this state tends to be very difficult, if not impossible. Expert support may be needed.
- **Fear.** In this state, our thinking becomes almost totally reflexive and centered in the survival system. It becomes difficult for us to hear or even recognize