

The 4-Phase Escalation Map

What is happening in the pupil – and what to do, and not do, in each phase.

WHY A MAP?

Behavioural escalation is not a single event – it is a sequence of phases, each with a different physiology and a different intervention window. The same response that works in Phase 1 will fail in Phase 3. This map gives you the right move for the right moment. Read it before you need it. In a crisis, no one reads anything.

The four phases

PHASE 1 · TRIGGER

PUPIL'S STATE

- › Something has just unsettled the pupil – an instruction, a comment, a change.
- › Body is becoming tense. Voice may rise slightly. Eye contact narrows.
- › Thinking and self-control are still relatively available. Reasoning is still possible – but the window is small.

✓ YOUR JOB

- › Notice early. The trigger phase is your widest window for low-cost intervention.
- › Lower your own voice. Slow your own pace. Move nearby if safe and non-threatening; do not crowd the pupil/student or block their space.
- › Offer a quiet acknowledgement: "I see something's bothering you."
- › Re-direct with a small, specific task that gives the pupil a way out without losing face.

✗ NOT THIS

- › Do not corner the pupil verbally with "What's the matter with you?"
- › Do not raise your voice to match theirs.
- › Do not call attention to it in front of the class.

PHASE 2 · ESCALATION

PUPIL'S STATE

- › Frustration is now visible – louder voice, hostile body language, refusal language.
- › Stress and emotion systems are becoming dominant. Reasoning is becoming hard.

✓ YOUR JOB

- › Reduce stimuli where possible – lower your voice, reduce audience pressure, simplify the task, and give physical space.
- › Speak in single short sentences. "I'm here. We can fix this."
- › Offer two limited choices, both acceptable. "Stay at this desk, or

✗ NOT THIS

- › Do not deliver a long explanation. Words past the first sentence are not heard.
- › Do not threaten consequences you will not enforce.
- › Do not touch the pupil unless safety requires it.

- › The pupil may seek an audience. Your reaction is being watched.

move with me to the agreed quiet spot – your choice."

- › Buy time. Three minutes of de-escalation now saves twenty minutes of fallout.

PHASE 3 · CRISIS

PUPIL'S STATE

- › The pupil is in a high-threat state; reasoning is unlikely to land.
- › The pupil may shout, throw, push, run, freeze, or shut down. (If the pupil moves to an agreed supervised space, manage quietly. If they leave the supervised area or school site, follow the school's missing-from-class/absconding or child-safety procedure immediately.)
- › Anything you say now is processed as threat or noise. At this point, the pupil may have very limited access to choice, language and reflection. Treat it as a regulation and safety problem first, not a compliance debate.

✓ YOUR JOB

- › Safety first. Move other pupils away. Clear the immediate space.
- › Stay present, stay quiet. Your steady presence is the message.
- › Get a second adult if possible. Do not face the crisis alone if you can avoid it.
- › Wait. Many crises begin to subside when not fuelled, though timing varies and safety monitoring remains essential.

✗ NOT THIS

- › Do not reason. Do not lecture. Do not demand apologies.
- › Do not use physical intervention as punishment or control. Use restrictive intervention/reasonable force only where immediate safety leaves no safer option, using no more force than necessary, for the shortest time possible, and according to local law, school policy and training.
- › Do not impose consequences during the crisis. They will not register.

PHASE 4 · RECOVERY

PUPIL'S STATE

- › The wave is passing. Body is calmer. Eyes may avoid yours.
- › Often: shame, exhaustion, sometimes tears. The pupil is reachable again – fragile.
- › This phase decides whether the next crisis is shorter or longer.

✓ YOUR JOB

- › Re-establish connection before anything else. "That was hard. I'm glad you're back."
- › Offer water, a quiet space, a small task that restores normality.
- › Briefly name what happened – together – without blame: "What did you notice in your body?"
- › Plan one tiny step for next time. The conversation about consequences comes later, not now.

✗ NOT THIS

- › Do not interrogate. "Why did you do that?" closes the door.
- › Do not return to academic work immediately as if nothing happened.
- › Do not lead with consequences while the pupil/student is still dysregulated. Defer detailed correction until they are calm enough to process it – unless immediate safety, safeguarding, bullying, discriminatory behaviour or serious-harm procedures require action now.

3 things this map teaches

1. THE EARLIER YOU INTERVENE, THE CHEAPER IT IS

- A 30-second redirection in Phase 1 can prevent a much longer crisis in Phase 3.
- The cost often rises sharply: each later phase usually takes more adult time, attention and recovery work.
- Cultivating with-it-ness (Kounin) – noticing micro-signals – is one of the most useful preventive skills.

2. THE SAME WORDS HAVE DIFFERENT EFFECTS IN DIFFERENT PHASES

- "Let's calm down" works in Phase 1. In Phase 3, it sounds patronising and may extend the crisis.
- "Tell me what you noticed in your body" works in Phase 4 – once the pupil is reachable. In Phase 2 it sounds like a quiz.
- Match your language to the phase, not to your emotional state.

3. RECOVERY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PHASE, AND THE MOST OFTEN SKIPPED

- What you do in the first ten minutes of Phase 4 shapes the next crisis.
- Re-connect before correcting. Connection is the bridge over which any later conversation has to travel.
- If you cannot give the pupil ten minutes of attention right now, name it: "I want to talk this through with you. Let's do it after lunch." Then keep that promise.

THREE RULES THAT HOLD IN EVERY PHASE

1. Safety first. If safety is at risk, all other priorities pause until safety is restored.
2. Your regulation helps regulate the pupil/student. If you escalate, escalation becomes more likely; if you stay steady, de-escalation becomes more possible.
3. There is no shame in calling for backup. A second adult is often helpful, especially for safety and witness. Avoid crowding the pupil/student with multiple adults unless safety requires it.

RECORD-KEEPING AFTER A CRISIS

After any Phase 3 incident, record factually according to school policy: what happened, what safety steps were taken, who was informed, and what follow-up is needed (UK: KCSIE recording obligations; Australia: National Principles record-keeping and reporting).

LINKED MATERIALS

- **#12** IF-THEN: 8 Rapid Response Scripts – concrete language for Phases 1 and 2.
- **#13** Stop the Question Spiral – for one specific Phase 2 escalation pattern.
- **CS3** Patrick and the Toaster – case study walking through all four phases.