

Turn Challenging Moments Around

WHEN STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROVES PROBLEMATIC

By Jeremy McCracken, with Karlie McCracken

Have you ever had a student who wouldn't stop crying or simply refused to ski or snowboard? What about a student whose behavior was disruptive to the lesson? Have you felt helpless or unsure of what to do in these situations?

As with any new experience, a ski or snowboard lesson can be frustrating, scary, and difficult for beginners. Chances are, you'll sometimes teach students facing emotional challenges – especially during children's lesson since younger students are still learning how to manage their behaviors and emotions.¹ While instructors have long received training on the technical aspect of skiing, there's now equal emphasis on the value of people and teaching skills – which can definitely come in handy with a student who is upset.

My training and experience as a ski instructor at California's Northstar resort has given me skills in behavior management and working with people who are frustrated and scared. And, as a youth counselor at a detention facility, courses in Professional Assault Crisis Training (Pro-ACT) and Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) offered additional insight in working with people who have difficulty controlling their behaviors and emotions. A 5-step approach I learned in this latter training may prove helpful to colleagues in the snowsports industry, especially instructors. (Of course, make sure any process you use

comply with your resort or ski schools recommended policies and protocols.

WORKING WITH AN UPSET STUDENT

We've all worked with upset students. Maybe they're never seen snow and are uncomfortable or fearful. And, with children, maybe they're scared to be separated from their parents and just plain tired. Whatever their reasons, they do not want to participate in the lesson.

To explain my approach, I'll use the example of working with a frustrated eight-year-old girl who didn't want to ski. Let's call her Sarah. The first two days of lessons with another instructor, she cried so much she ended up leaving with her parents and not skiing. On the third day, I was assigned to work with her. I knew she was overwhelmed by emotions, and that I'd need to start by helping her calm down.

I introduced myself to Sarah and her parents. The introduction can often lead to a conversation where the parents can share why their child is behaving this way and provide helpful advice for addressing these behaviors. Believe me, this was probably not the first time their child acted this way.

Using some timely intervention steps can save the day for a fearful or scared child.



IN THE ARTICLE

- ▶ You'll likely teach students who have difficulty managing their behaviors and emotions.
- ▶ It's helpful to remain close and remind the student that you can help them when they are ready.
- ▶ Through crisis-intervention strategies, you can calm the student and work together to create a plan for success.

I soon learned that Sarah didn't want to ski because she wanted to be with her parents. I let Sarah and her parents know that this was not uncommon and that we had a plan that could lead to a complete and positive lesson. It's important to let parents know you understand this is a difficult situation, but that you'll make every effort to deliver a safe and enjoyable lesson. In doing so, instructors create a low-pressure environment.

HOW TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF WHEN A STUDENT IS UPSET

I use the 3-part message when I introduce myself to a student who is upset. And, again, be sure to also talk with their parents.

THE 3-PART MESSAGE

1. You **appear** to be upset; I understand that.
2. I **can** and **want** to help you.
3. **How** can I help you? (e.g., why don't you want to ski or snowboard?)

The 3-part message lets the student know that you understand and are willing to help them. Their answers may also tell you why they are upset and do not want to participate in the lesson. Asking questions and listening can help you change their experience to a positive and memorable one.

A 5-STEP APPROACH FOR HOW TO INTERVENE

Seeing that Sarah was still upset, I knelt beside her so we could talk one-on-one. I let her know I was going to have another instructor watch the class while I took her to a quiet, safe place where I could help her. Any change of environment helps. I sat Sarah at a table by herself, offered food and water, and disengaged from her crying.

I find it helpful to remain close and remind the student that you can help them when they are ready. I refer to this as isolation with proximity. To move forward, they need to choose to stop crying and engage in conversation with you. It's important they decide to stop crying for the right reason: because they want your help and they want to take some control of their day.

And here's where the "5 Steps of Crisis Intervention" I've learned in my training as a youth counselor comes into play. The five steps are:

1. Drain off
2. Promote cognitive thinking
3. Central issue
4. Make a plan
5. Share

1. DRAIN OFF

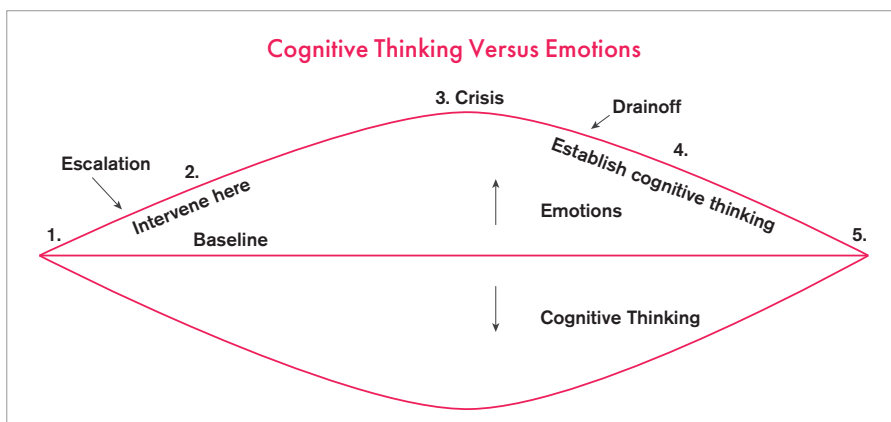
Based on concepts taught in LSCI training, Drain Off™ is a skill that helps an upset person release the overwhelming emotions that are preventing them from engaging with others. Although we can't force a student to calm down, we can try to facilitate the process by helping them feel heard, supported, and safe. They need to choose to let us help them, and we can start this process by reminding them that **"I can help you, I want to help you, and I want you to be successful and enjoy your lesson."**

They'll soon realize they have two choices; they can either continue to sit there or they can let you help them. It usually doesn't take long for your student to choose to let you help them.

Introduce yourself to your students and tell them that you are here to help them learn and have fun. Remember to involve their parents.



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Once they decide to move forward with the lesson, be sure to give them plenty of positive affirmation for the choice they made – and emphasize how they were in control of that choice.

Sarah cried for about five minutes before letting me know she was ready to stop crying and talk to me. Now that she had stopped crying and was ready to talk, I worked with her to promote cognitive thinking.

2. PROMOTE COGNITIVE THINKING

Cognitive thinking is an individual's ability to receive and process information, follow directions, think rationally, and make appropriate decisions. If your student is upset, they need to return to cognitive thinking before you can move forward with the lesson.

Baseline is a mental balancing point where cognitive thinking is high and the person is in control of their emotions and behaviors. This is where you can have productive conversations and address any issues impacting the lesson.

There are several methods you can use to promote cognitive thinking. One strategy is to ask questions like, "What is your favorite movie or animal?" These questions can elicit happy feelings and may lead to a conversation.

Another strategy is to ask your student about their morning or what they did the night before. LSCI refers to this as building a

timeline, a strategy used to help people bring language to emotion and increase cognitive thinking. Building a timeline can also illuminate other factors at play or the issue that is causing your person to feel upset. You may learn they didn't go to bed until midnight and got up early; they are tired.

These strategies can help your student find a mental space where they can have a productive conversation with you. **Basically, you're doing whatever you can to get their brain to temporarily focus on something other than what is making them upset, so you can prepare them to discuss their problem.** Talk with your student to assess when they are thinking cognitively and approaching baseline.

I promoted cognitive thinking by asking Sarah questions. She wasn't sure why I was asking them, but we were having productive conversations as she was heading toward baseline.

3. CENTRAL ISSUE

Once your student feels like they can think clearly and communicate, you can talk to them to learn more about the issue upsetting them. With Sarah, her central issue was separation anxiety from her parents and a little fear. Her anxiety manifested itself as frustration, and she attempted to take control of the situation by crying. While I suspected separation anxiety, I only learned about her fear after asking questions.

You can use the "Behavior and Intervention Chart" below to see what types of interventions are best suited for certain behaviors, as well as desired outcomes from these interventions. Different behaviors and emotions call for different forms of intervention.

For example, students who are behaving out of fear and frustration are responding to outside circumstances and you should approach them with understanding, flexibility, and sympathy. If your student is acting manipulatively or in an unsafe and disrupt-

Behavior and Intervention Chart

BEHAVIOR	INTERVENTION	DESIRED OUTCOME
Fear – What can we say or do to reduce the threat?	Threat reduction	Perceived safety
Frustration – How can we lend control to our frustrated students? What choices can we give them?	Lend control	Self-control
Manipulation – We do not have the time or energy for this; we simply detach. We still need to help the student, but we want them to engage in a healthy manner.	Detach	Positive engagement
Unsafe/Disruptive – What can we say and do to avoid having to state consequences? If consequences are needed, which are appropriate?	State consequences	Safe choices

This chart gives you four possible categories of behaviors your upset student may exhibit, how to intervene, and the desired outcome.

tive manner, they are choosing to act this way and you should respond by directly asking them to change their behavior.

Sarah was frustrated, but her crying appeared to be manipulative. Not wishing to not engage with manipulative behaviors, I told her that I could and wanted to help her, but I could only help when she stopped crying. Once she realized that crying wasn't getting her anywhere, she decided to stop so I could help her. When she was ready, I wanted to help her feel in control. I did so

by asking yes or no questions, sharing our schedule for the day, and offering choices.

Ask Yes or No Questions – Asking yes or no questions shows your student they are in control of how they answer. Be sure to give them positive affirmations for their answers. You can ask them if you can help them take their helmet or gloves off, if they would like some water, or if it is okay if you keep helping them. These questions may seem routine, but

they remind your student have some control of their answers and how the day will proceed.

Schedule – Share the day's schedule with your student so they know what their day will look like and when the lesson will be over. Simply knowing how the lesson will unfold helps them feel more in control. Make the day seem simple and let them know you will be there to help when needed.

Offer Choices – Offer your student choices that you can accommodate to show them they can shape what the lesson looks like. Showing that you value their input will help them feel in control of the day.

4. MAKE A PLAN

Thank your student for talking to you about why they were upset and make a plan for the day. Be encouraging and remind them that now you can have a fun day skiing or snowboarding together. Working together and communicating will help your student feel listened to and in control.



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With proper teaching tactics, behavioral problems can be replaced by the joy of learning a new sport.

For Sarah the plan was simple. She was going to finish the lesson. She knew what her day was going to look like, knew it would be fun, knew she could do it, and knew I was there to help her. Here's what the plan looked like:

- Finish our break
- Practice on the magic carpet
- Take a break (hot chocolate)

- Practice a little more
- Eat lunch with our friends
- Maybe ride the chairlift and ski down
- End the lesson

5. SHARE

At the end of the day, thank your team for helping with the situation. Maybe they kept an eye on your class at met up or over lunch so you could work one-on-one with the student. You can also share what worked and didn't work with your student, so you can all learn from the experience. This will help everyone in the future.

At the end of the day, after all our students had left, some team members asked how the lesson went. I shared what worked and what didn't work.

Sarah was a great kid. She had learned that behaving negatively (crying) sometimes got her what she wanted. Because her crying was manipulative, I chose to detach from it. She decided, as most kids do, to stop crying, take some control, and see if I could help her. Once she was at baseline and thinking rationally, we worked together to have a fun day.

USING CRISIS INTERVENTION IN YOUR LESSONS

Anyone can use these steps to turn a student's day around and help them have a fun, memorable experience. With more successes, you will build your confidence. Remember, you will get fearful, frustrated, manipulative, and unsafe or disruptive students, but if you are prepared to listen and work with them, you can have a fun and successful day on the slopes. **32**

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ENDNOTE

1. Turner, Cody. "Why Children Aren't Behaving, And What You Can Do About It." National Public Radio. June 2, 2018. Access at: [tiny.cc/NPRChildBehavior](https://www.npr.org/2018/06/02/620888881/why-children-arent-behaving).

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