



AGITATION

Reintegreat School Toolkit

Supporting Children in Agitation

1. Introduction

Agitation can be one of the most challenging behaviours to manage in school. When children lose control, their own safety and the safety of those around them may be at risk. Our role is to support pupils in a way that is **firm, kind, consistent, and non-shaming**, ensuring every child feels cared for even when behaviour is unsafe.

This toolkit provides practical strategies, grounded in **trauma-informed and relational practice**, to help staff recognise signs of agitation, prevent escalation, and respond effectively when incidents occur.

2. What is Agitation?

Agitation is behaviour that presents as **irritability, restlessness, or rising tension**, which—if not supported—may escalate into harmful or aggressive behaviour.

Children who become agitated often feel:

- **Unsafe** emotionally or physically.
- **Overwhelmed** by their environment or internal feelings.
- **Out of control**, which can be frightening for them as well as others.

If not managed with care, agitation can cause **secondary distress** for peers observing the behaviour. It is therefore essential that adults demonstrate calm, confident, and compassionate intervention.

3. Common Symptoms of Agitation

- Angry outbursts.
- Restlessness (pacing, fidgeting, shuffling feet).
- Impulsive or disruptive behaviour.
- Excessive talking or constant movement.
- Difficulty focusing or holding a conversation.
- Anxiety and irritability.
- Physical signs of tension (clenched fists, wringing hands, rigid posture).

4. Understanding Triggers

Agitation rarely happens without cause. Identifying triggers allows staff to **anticipate and prevent escalation**. Use behaviour logs and observation to spot patterns.

Common Triggers:

- **Transitions** – uncertainty about what comes next.
- **Environmental discomfort** – being too hot/cold, needing food or drink.
- **Tiredness** – insufficient sleep, especially after weekends or late nights.
- **Physical needs** – lack of exercise, needing movement breaks.
- **Crowded spaces** – close contact at lunch, lining up, or group work.
- **Overstimulation** – too many activities, noise, or sensory overload.
- **Diet** – low blood sugar or high-sugar foods leading to “hangry” behaviour.

👉 Toolkit tip: Staff should use **consistent visual supports** (visual timetables, “Now and Next” boards, countdown timers) to reduce uncertainty and ease transitions.

5. Prevention and Early Support

Proactive strategies include:

- Building **predictable routines** and clear boundaries.
- Offering **movement breaks** or active roles in the classroom.
- Reducing **sensory overload** by decluttering and minimising noise.
- Teaching **personal space** strategies (arm’s length rule in lines).
- Providing **healthy snacks** where possible.
- Planning **quiet zones** or safe spaces children can access before behaviour escalates.

6. Teaching Children to Regulate Emotions

Children need explicit teaching to recognise and manage their emotions.

Strategies:

- **Label emotions:** Support pupils to identify feelings (“I feel angry,” “I feel worried”).
- **Normalise strong emotions:** Anger and frustration are normal, but unsafe behaviours are not.
- **Social stories:** Use visuals and short scripts to rehearse safe responses.
- **Role models:** Share times when you managed anger and what helped.
- **Literature and puppets:** Discuss characters’ emotions and alternative safe responses.
- **Calming tools:**
 - Breathing slowly (counting to five in and out).
 - Squeezing hands together.
 - Guided mantras: “Kind hands, kind feet, kind words.”
 - Walk away strategies.

7. Containing and Managing Outbursts

Prevent escalation by:

- Redirecting early (errands, humour, distraction, giving responsibility).
- Anticipating triggers and intervening consistently.
- Providing a calm “safe space” or workstation with regulation tools.

During an outburst:

- Stay calm and emotionally regulated.
- Use a **low, steady voice** and minimal words.
- Reassure with presence: *“I’m here. You’re safe. I’m going to help everyone stay safe.”*
- Avoid confrontation, raised voices, or shaming.
- Focus on safety first – for the child and peers.

After an outburst:

- Offer simple, caring directions: *“Here’s a tissue. Shall we get a drink of water?”*
- Support the child to repair where possible (tidying, making a card, apologising).
- Debrief calmly when the child is regulated, focusing on solutions and future strategies, not blame.
- Reinforce the message: *“It’s okay to feel angry. It’s not okay to hurt yourself or others. Next time, we can try...”*

8. Staff Wellbeing and Professional Conduct

Children are highly sensitive to adult tone, body language, and emotional states.

- Regulate yourself first – take a breath before responding.
- Model calmness and control.
- Avoid showing fear, anger, or frustration.
- Maintain a stance of **firm kindness and professional authority**.

9. Practical Toolkit Resources (*to include in the pack*)

- **Visual timetable templates.**
- **Now & Next boards.**
- **Calming cards** (breathing, counting, positive mantras).
- **Behaviour log sheets** for triggers and incidents.
- **Social story templates.**
- **Safe space checklist** for classroom set-up.

10. Key Reminders

- Agitation is a sign of emotional distress, not defiance.
- Prevention is always more effective than crisis management.
- Stay calm, kind, and consistent.
- Relationships are at the heart of recovery after incidents.
- Support peers who may also feel unsafe.

11. Further Guidance & Policy Links

- **DfE: Behaviour in Schools**
- **Ofsted Education Inspection Framework** – emphasis on behaviour and attitudes.
- **Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools**
- **Trauma-Informed Schools UK guidance**