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*Mahri Wrightington*

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# The Rule of One: An Effective De-Escalation Strategy

**Title:** The Rule of One: An Effective De-Escalation Strategy  
**Category:** Behavior  
**Audience:** All Staff  
**Grades:** All Grade Levels

**Description:** *In this module, teams will learn how applying the Rule of One can shorten the intensity and duration of a student escalation. When we allow students to hear one voice, see one face, and receive one message, we avoid potentially mixed messages, we set boundaries, and we allow the student to de-escalate in a controlled and respectful manner. This module includes an explanation of the strategy, a case study depicting the implementation of the strategy, as well as two professional development activities to help teams internalize the strategy and plan for implementation.*

**Directions:** *It is important that the Rule of One is discussed among team members in order to have consistent implementation. Your team may be the whole staff or it may be a team of teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators within a certain program or grade level. You can decide how to use the module to best fit your needs. To get the most out of this Mini PD Module, read the content and complete the reflection activity individually, then come together as a team to create an implementation plan.*

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## INTRODUCTION

If you work in a school, no matter what your role is, you undoubtedly have experienced working with students who exhibit challenging behavior. If you find that managing student behavior is a significant part of your role, you are not alone! In a survey conducted by Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2014), a staggering 99% of teachers indicated that their classrooms contained students who require social-emotional and behavioral interventions. This tells us that supporting student behavior is a necessary part of the job and all of us need to learn effective strategies to do this well.

As educators, the most stressful moments of our day can happen when a student is escalated and we have to make several quick decisions to keep the other students calm and safe, and to help the escalated student regain control. There is research to suggest that teacher stress can create increased behavioral challenges in students (Milkie & Warner, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that we work on our de-escalation skills so as to NOT contribute to an already challenging situation with our own stress and heightened emotions. When escalated student behavior arises, we want to remain calm, cool, and collected. A calm and purposeful response will help us to achieve effective outcomes with our heightened students.

One of the most important things you can do to handle these challenging moments effectively is to predict that challenging behaviors are going to happen and have a set plan in your mind for how you will handle them. If you know what your plan is before the behavior happens, you are much more likely to be effective in addressing it!

Something that often happens when a student becomes escalated is that all nearby adults try to help. While on the surface, it seems like a helpful strategy to have all of the available staff help in a challenging moment, having too many adults present when a student is behaviorally heightened can actually INCREASE the duration and intensity of the escalation. This happens because the student may receive mixed messages from the adults and is unsure as to what is expected of him or how to respond.

When other adults step in to help, while the intention is certainly positive, it creates confusion for the student because various adults may approach the situation with different ideas, interaction styles, tones of voice, and word choices.

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## LEARN THE STRATEGY

Let's learn about the Rule of One and how it can be implemented as a de-escalation strategy to decrease the intensity and duration of an escalated behavior incident. For the purposes of this module, you can picture any type of escalated behavior that you may witness in your specific role such as tantrums, defiance that includes yelling or cursing, physical aggression toward self, others, or property, or even elopement from an area. In essence, escalated behavior, for our purposes, refers to any student behavior that is unsafe and/or significantly disruptive, requiring adult intervention to calm the student.

The "One" in the Rule of One refers to several things - the adult voice that the student hears, the adult face that the student sees, and the adult message that the student receives during an escalated behavior incident. In essence, the Rule of One means that the student *should hear ONE voice, see ONE face, and receive ONE message* during an escalated behavior incident.

All team members must understand the basic principle that ONE adult should take the lead on communicating with a student during an escalation. It is particularly important that the ONE adult communicating with the student picks a "message" that he or she wants the student to receive and sticks with it until the de-escalation is over. That is, we don't want to give in to bargaining, negotiating, or bribing students by offering different outcomes. Here are some examples of "messages" that we might give a student during an escalation:

- "When you sit down, I will know you are ready to talk about your choices."
- "When your voice is calm and quiet, I can talk to you about your options."
- "That behavior is not safe and it is done now. When you tell me you're ready, we can move on to your next activity."

Next, all team members must share a common understanding of the interaction rules and communication guidelines surrounding the Rule of One. If another adult wants to assist during an escalation or is concerned about the situation, that individual should address the STAFF member, NOT THE STUDENT. For example, let's say that Mrs. Garcia is working with Sam, who is yelling and pacing. Mr. Jones is nearby and thinks that he should step in and help. In this case, Mr. Jones should address Mrs. Garcia and simply ask, "Can I help?" If Mrs. Garcia says no, Mr. Jones should respect that and step away. If appropriate, Mr. Jones can choose to stay close by to assist if the situation escalates further, but he should stay out of sight of Sam if at all possible.

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The lead, or the ONE, should be established as soon as adults notice that a student has become escalated or is about to become escalated. This can be established among adults verbally (e.g., *“Thank you for trying to help, Mr. Jones, but I already have given Sam directions and am waiting for him to follow through.”*) or nonverbally (e.g., *by holding up 1 finger and then pointing to self.*)

Sometimes it is not always possible for the same adult to stay in their position as the lead communicator during an escalation due to scheduling constraints or other factors. In these cases, it is acceptable for an adult to “pass” their role as the ONE to a colleague. This can be established verbally (e.g., *“Mr. Jones, can you help? Sam knows I am waiting for him to take a seat but I have to teach my reading group now. Can you stay here with Sam while he works on getting himself settled into his seat?”*) or nonverbally (e.g., *by holding up 1 finger and then pointing to your colleague.*)

All verbal communication that occurs among adults in front of students should be neutral and respectful, and free of blame or shaming. Students are always listening. Even if it appears as though they are not listening, we should always assume they can hear each and every one of our words. Therefore, we need to choose our words carefully (especially when our words are about the student), ensuring that we don’t contribute further to the situation by triggering more negative feelings within the student. The following chart helps us understand the difference between a blameful approach and a respectful approach to adult-adult communication that occurs in front of students:

<b>Blameful or Shaming Statements</b>	<b>Neutral and Respectful Statements</b>
Sam is being very rude and has broken my pencils and rulers!	Sam knows I am waiting for him to calm down so we can talk.
I may need you to step in. I just can’t handle this. Sam is out of control.	I’m so glad you are here, Mr. Jones. I know you and Sam work well together. Would you mind waiting with Sam while he calms down?
Look at how he’s acting! I’m probably going to be here a while.	Sam and I are working on calming down. Thanks for checking on us. I’m sure we will be back in class soon.

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Let's review the important components of the Rule of One:

- Students should hear ONE voice, see ONE face, and receive ONE message during an escalated behavior incident.
- Nearby adults who want to help should address the staff member (not the student) and ask, "Can I help?" If the original staff member says no, adults should not interfere but stay nearby (and out of eyesight of the student if possible) in case assistance is required later.
- Adults should communicate with one another to establish who is the ONE working with the student during the escalation. This can be done through verbal or nonverbal communication
- Adults can pass off their status of being the ONE to another staff member through verbal or nonverbal communication.
- Any verbal communication between adults that happens in front of the student should be neutral and respectful. Assume students are listening to you talk about them even if it appears they are not.

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## UNDERSTAND THE STRATEGY

*Let's read about 9-year-old Idris and how his school team used the Rule of One to help him de-escalate more quickly.*

Special education teacher, Mrs. Cort, and school psychologist, Mr. Patel, co-facilitate an alternative learning program for third and fourth grade students at King Elementary School. There are 15 students who access this program throughout the school day as well as 5 paraprofessionals who support the students in various ways. Additionally, some of the students receive support from the speech-language pathologist, and occupational therapist. The school nurse and the school principal are also frequent visitors to the classroom. With 11 adults and 15 students coming and going throughout the day, the classroom can get a little hectic!

Idris is a 9 year-old third grade student who participates in the program due to his difficulties with following directions and exhibiting safe behavior. When Idris gets frustrated with work, he often becomes escalated, engaging in behaviors such as lapping the room, tipping chairs over as he goes, and swiping tables that are full of materials so that everything falls to the floor. Idris will typically wander around the room, engaging in these behaviors until there is a natural transition in the schedule and he becomes interested in something new or he is able to leave the room for the next class period.

On one particular occasion, Mrs. Cort started a math lesson by passing out a worksheet and a small pile of colored blocks to each student. Idris was seated at a table with one other student and a paraprofessional, Ms. Yen. Upon receiving his materials, Idris loudly exclaimed, "I am not doing math!" and pushed his materials to the floor. Ms. Yen picked up the materials and placed them back on the table, stating, "Idris, that's not how we treat things in our classroom." Idris loudly yelled, "Yes, it is!" and then swiped his tablemate's materials onto the floor as well.

At this point, Mrs. Cort approached the table and asked Idris to pick up his classmate's materials and then take his seat. Idris, however, was already on the move, beginning to lap the room and attempting to swipe materials from other students' work spaces. Having heard the commotion start, Mr. Patel, the program social worker, approached Idris and asked him to have a talk in his office. Idris darted around Mr. Patel and continued to disrupt every pile of math materials that he could find.

Mrs. Lundegrun, the school principal, happened to walk in just then and quickly realized she needed to help get the classroom back under control. Mrs. Lundegrun knelt down, stopped Idris as she ran by her and asked, "What's going on my friend? I am so glad to

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see you! I need someone to feed the fish in the main office. Come with me!” Idris wriggled away from her and continued lapping the classroom. When Mrs. Lundgren asked what was going on, Mrs. Cort stated, “He always does this whenever he is asked to do work. It makes it very challenging to get anything done with the other students as you can see.”

In this scenario, four different adults attempted to intervene with Idris (Ms. Yen, Mrs. Cort, Mr. Patel, and finally Mrs. Lundegrun.) And unfortunately, none of them were effective in their approach. Idris continued to escalate, disrupting the learning environment and potentially upsetting the other students. In this scenario, Idris was allowed to swipe materials from the floor without picking them up (as demonstrated by Ms. Yen picking them up herself) and asked to pick up the materials (by Mrs. Cort); he was asked to sit down (by Mrs. Cort), and asked to leave the room (by Mr. Patel and Mrs. Lundegrun.) With four adults using various approaches, Idris was receiving a whole lot of mixed messaging about what is appropriate behavior in school.

Now, what would be different if the team applied the Rule of One? Let’s see what could happen...

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Rule of One Component	Adult Action
<p><b>Students should hear ONE voice, see ONE face, and receive ONE message during an escalated behavior incident.</b></p>	<p><i>Ms. Yen, being the closest to the student could have taken the lead in addressing the behavior, knowing that an escalation was about to occur. She could have chosen one message to offer Idris, helping him understand what is expected of him. For example, “After you pick up the materials, we can take a break to talk about why math is bothering you.” She may need to repeat this several times but should not engage in any other conversation or redirection with Idris beyond this statement.</i></p>
<p><b>Nearby adults who want to help should address the staff member (not the student) and ask, “Can I help?” If the original staff member says no, adults should not interfere but stay nearby (and out of eyesight of the student if possible) in case assistance is required later.</b></p>	<p><i>Mrs. Cort and Mr. Patel could have asked Ms. Yen if she needed assistance rather than intervening directly with the student. This way, if Ms. Yen was unsure what to do or had to prioritize her support of the other student at the table, she could have accepted the help and passed over her lead role to someone else.</i></p> <p><i>Additionally, when Mrs. Lundegrun entered, she could have asked the adults if her help was needed before intervening with Idris.</i></p>
<p><b>Adults should communicate with one another to establish who is the ONE working with the student during the escalation. This can be done through verbal or nonverbal communication.</b></p>	<p><i>If Mrs. Cort wanted to take over the behavioral redirection for Idris, she could have used nonverbal communication to let her colleagues know that she would take the lead or she could have stated, “Ms. Yen, why don’t you help the other students get started with math and Idris and I will figure out what he needs.”</i></p>
<p><b>Adults can pass off their status of being the ONE to another staff member through verbal or nonverbal communication.</b></p>	<p><i>If the adult leading the de-escalation (the ONE) wants to pass his or her role to another staff, he or she could do so nonverbally or by stating, “I have to help the students at the other table.”</i></p>
<p><b>Any verbal communication between adults that happens in front of the student should be neutral and respectful. Assume students are listening to you talk about them even if it appears they are not.</b></p>	<p><i>Mrs. Cort could have chosen her words more delicately to ensure she did not trigger Idris further. For example, to answer Mrs. Lundegrun’s question, she may have stated, “Idris is working on getting back to his seat.”</i></p>

There are other appropriate ways in which this scenario could have played out. And obviously, there are a lot more components to this situation that need to be addressed. But for now, we are staying focused on the Rule of One and how it could be used to decrease the intensity and duration of Idris’ behavior escalation. What other ideas do you have about how this team could have applied the Rule of One?

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## APPLY THE STRATEGY

*ACTIVITY 1: Reflect on the questions below individually and then discuss as a team*

Think of a scenario when you were involved with at least one other colleague in trying to mutually de-escalate a student? What do you think would have been different if you employed the Rule of One?

When you think about your interaction style, how does it compare to the suggested components of the Rule of One? Do you think you jump in too soon when another adult is handling a situation? Do you give the students more than one message?

Having learned the Rule of One, what communication guidelines do you think would help your team?

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*ACTIVITY 2: Discuss and agree upon guidelines for implementation of the Rule of One in your school or within your team*

Rule of One Component	Team Agreements - How will we implement it?
<p>Students should hear <b>ONE</b> voice, see <b>ONE</b> face, and receive <b>ONE</b> message during an escalated behavior incident.</p>	
<p>Nearby adults who want to help should address the staff member (not the student) and ask, "Can I help?" If the original staff member says no, adults should not interfere but stay nearby (and out of eyesight of the student if possible) in case assistance is required later.</p>	
<p>Adults should communicate with one another to establish who is the <b>ONE</b> working with the student during the escalation. This can be done through verbal or nonverbal communication.</p>	
<p>Adults should communicate with one another to establish who is the <b>ONE</b> working with the student during the escalation. This can be done through verbal or nonverbal communication.</p>	
<p>Adults can pass off their status of being the <b>ONE</b> to another staff member through verbal or nonverbal communication.</p>	
<p>Any verbal communication between adults that happens in front of the student should be neutral and respectful. Assume students are listening to you talk about them even if it appears they are not.</p>	

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