

Cues and Strategies: What Does Fear Look Like and What Can We Do?

When a student experiences fear, survival systems begin to activate. On the following 10 pages are:

- an **overview** of the internal states , related brain systems, and some impact of fear
- **external cues** for each internal state
- **classroom strategies** to engage students at each stage, generated by classroom teachers and child care counsellors.

Internal State ...	Calm	Arousal	Alarm	Fear	Terror
Brain System ...	Neo-Cortex/ Cortex	Cortex/ Limbic	Limbic/ Midbrain	Midbrain/ Brainstem	Brain Stem/ Autonomic
Plans ...	Extended Future	Days/ Hours	Hours/ Minutes	Minutes/ Seconds	Loss of Time
Does ...	Thinking (abstract)	Thinking (concrete)	Emotion	Reactive	reflexive
Responds to...	Talk, Ideas	Talk, Engaged Learning	Engaged Learning, Play, Metaphors	Doing, Cues	Safety Cues (non verbal)

For more on how fear changes thinking go to ChildTraumaAcademy <http://childtraumaacademy.com>

Some External Cues**Body:**

- relaxed
- movements not too quick or too slow
- open body language
- posture is relaxed and open

Breathing rate:

- normal
- calm
- even

Face:

- Calm
- open facial expression
- Smiling
- eyes focused
- skin colour normal

Voice:

- calm voice
- not too high- or low-pitched
- not too soft or loud
- can verbalize
- matches vocal level of class

Social:

- responsive to environment
- gets social cues
- takes direction
- awareness of others
- seeks feedback
- participates in social activities

Cognition and Attention:

- able to focus
- on task
- attentive
- can reason
- do abstract thinking
- plan for the extended future

Behaviour:

- can choose between options (e.g., cooperates or is mischievous or on-task, etc.)
- can be redirected, makes choices

Sample Strategies to Engage

- Future planning
- Abstract concepts
- Introduce new learning
- Problem solving through reasoning
- Teaching
- Positive reinforcement
- Use humour
- Let the student carry the proverbial ball regarding becoming calmer
- Take time to explain fully and completely
- Create the big picture & long term focus for the student
- Build connection and give key safety
- Use metaphors
- Use this time to build relationship with the student
- Emphasize reasons for doing x, y, z
- Match breath rate, voice tone, blinking, to build rapport
- Build conflict resolution models
- Explore perspective taking
- Use this time to have students explore:
 - the student's personal strategies for getting back to calm (e.g., music, alone time, journaling, writing, etc.)
 - fight/flight , freeze/surrender responses as a normal survival responses to danger & key calming strategies
 - agreements about safety in the classroom
 - key trusted individuals to go to at school when the student is distressed
- Use this time to for the teacher to explore:
 - safe places in the classroom and school for the student when the student is distressed
 - activities that can build upon the student's personal strategies for getting back to calm (e.g., music options, writing clubs, art projects, etc.)
 - potential triggers for the student (review history)
 - student's preferred fight/flight , freeze/surrender responses in response to danger
 - possible key adults in the school who may future "go to" persons when the student is distressed
 - how to convey key messages of safety and caring

Arousal

Brain System: Cortex / Limbic

Some External Cues

Body:

- eyes become wider
- flushed * skin tone
- body posture change
- higher / lower* * activity level
- more / less body movement
- restless
- begins to wander
- body language changes
- may leave room

Breathing:

- more erratic
- faster
- slower

Face:

- fixed gaze or unfocussed gaze
- flushed
- facial expressions change, become more glazed, masked, stiff
- phasing out
- Pursed lips, eyebrows drawn down or up
- crying, watery eyes

Voice:

- increase or decrease in volume (e.g., too loud / too soft)
- may begin to swear
- start of whining or younger aged voice
- voice starts to be out of sync with calm classroom noise level
- academic words become harder to retrieve

flight/fight response *

freeze / surrender response **

more external cues for arousal



Sample Strategies to Engage

- Clear statements and directions
- Visual cues
- Say it with a word "Stop" "Go" "Come" "Start"
- External mediator around trigger – help sort it out
- Reduce amount of verbal, keep concrete
- Use verbal and non-verbal cues
- Redirect
- Distract
- Be clear with expectations, consequences
- Tactile
- Stress balls
- Brain Gym
- Movement
- "Go for a break"
- Create separation: from situation, from trigger, from task, from others, from room
- Remove trigger
- Concrete/hands on learning
- Deep breathing
- Self "time out"
- "Get a drink"
- "Go touch x,y,z,.."
- Use humour (especially older students)
- Physically help child refocus (e.g., "Look at me", "Turn and face around")
- Use positive peer group to re-focus
- Use expressions like "being on the team"
- Front load with expectations, "a part of you may not like this", goals and instructions
- Assign jobs
- Using simple cues / hand signals /familiar language / not threatening
- Calm voice tone
- Proximity control / light touch
- Use positive tone and words
- Change of environment / redirect
- Directive statements

Some More External Cues for Arousal


Social:
• less responsive to cues and environment
• resistant to direction
• “silly” social behaviour
• less aware of others
• resistant to feedback
• misses social cues
• may interpret self as “picked on
• misinterprets socially cues as threatening or negative
• moves to paired social activities, or is alone
Cognition and Attention:
• thinks in days or hours (not extended week)
• misinterpret
• less processing
• scattered thoughts
• language unclear
• heightened alertness
• resistant to direction
Behaviour:
• less focus on teacher and more focus on environment and other students
• reactive
• missing instructions may lead to slow to begin tasks
• rushed or incomplete work
• vigilant about classroom activities
• begin to avoid work, too much noise, other students in groups, etc.

More Samples Strategies to Engage

Be aware that strategies could move the student up or down the continuum (e.g., triggers, difficult tasks)
Let the student carry the proverbial ball around becoming more calm, and remind student of personal calming cues if necessary.
Remove the student from environment
Continue to build connections
Return to familiar people/situation
Touch (consider the student’s background and relationship with the student and the student’s comfort with safe touch)
Soothing support
Maintain safety for the student and others
Keep in group if not disruptive
Remove from stimuli
Monitor own response (voice, posture, stepping back)
Calm, monotone voice tone
Giving the student something tactile
Watch closely for timing when to talk, touch, explain, etc.
Word usage (strength-based instead of critical)
Model calming strategies
Create safety, consistency and predictability
Take control and provide structure
Use yes/no
Singing, rhymes
Rhymes
Authoritative approach for those students who want and need an authoritative adult set boundaries and redirect toward calm.
Use this time to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review the student’s self-calming strategies - Engage in one of the self-calming activities - Normalize what is happening

Alarm

Brain System: Limbic / Mid Brain


Some External Cues
Body:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eyes become even wider <u>flushed</u> * skin tone or colour shifts to <i>paler</i> body posture change more <u>aggressive</u> stance or more <i>closed stance</i> <u>higher</u> / <u>lower</u> **activity level <u>more</u> / <u>less</u> body movement <u>restless</u> <u>begins to wander</u> body language changes <u>may leave room</u>
Breathing:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>more erratic and faster</u> or <i>distinctly slower</i> body posture change more <u>aggressive</u> stance or more <i>closed stance</i>
Face:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>fixed gaze</u> or <i>unfocussed gaze</i> <u>flushed</u> facial expressions change, become more <i>glazed, masked, stiff</i> <u>phase out</u> <u>clenched</u> teeth <u>crying, watery</u> eyes
Voice:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>increase</u> or <i>decrease</i> in voice (e.g., too loud / too soft) <u>may begin to swear</u> <u>whining</u> <u>crying</u> voice out of sync with classroom noise level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hard to use words clearly
<p><u>flight/fight response</u> *</p> <p><u>freeze / surrender response</u> **</p> <p>more external cues for alarm</p> 

Sample Strategies to Engage
Clear statements and directions
Visual cues (e.g., point, hand sign for stop, smile)
Say it with a word (e.g., "Stop" "Go" "Come" "Start")
Tactile supports (e.g., something to hold, to touch, to draw, etc.)
Reduce amount of verbal, keep concrete
Use verbal and non-verbal cues
Redirect
Distract
Be clear with expectations, consequences
Expressive task (draw, paint, walk, music, journal, etc.)
Stress balls
Brain Gym
Movement
"Go for a break"
Create separation: from situation, from trigger, from task, from others, from room
Remove trigger
Concrete/hands on learning
Deep breathing
Self time out (calming space for student)
"Go touch x,y,z,.."
Use humour (especially older students)
Physically help the student refocus (e.g., "Look at me", "Turn and face around")
Assign jobs
Directive statements
Calm voice tone
Proximity control / light touch
Use metaphors
Change of environment / redirect
Word usage (strength based / non-critical)
Calming Box
Calming Centre in classroom
Simple choices (e.g., office or blue chair)
Offer calming choices (e.g., breathe now, walk now with me, get a drink of water)

More External Cues for Alarm:	More Strategies to Engage
Social:	Remove from stimuli
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less responsive to cues and environment 	Relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resistant to direction 	Familiar people/situation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “silly” social behaviour 	Soothing support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less aware of others 	Restoration of decreased physical state
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resistant to feedback 	Maintain safety for the student and others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> misses social cues 	Keep in group if not disruptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> misinterprets socially cues as threatening or negative 	Offer ways to express emotions (e.g., art work, journaling, clay or Playdoh, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> moves to paired social activities, or is alone 	Using simple cues / hand signals /familiar language / not threatening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>higher compliance</i> 	Create safety
Cognition and Attention:	Visual cues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> concrete 	Separation (person, situation, trigger)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> focus potentially threatening stimuli 	Clear statements and directions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less processing 	Use positive peer group to re-focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> scattered thoughts 	Watch closely for timing when to talk, touch, explain, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> language unclear 	Remove the student from environment (e.g., another room, hallway, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> thinks in hours at most, and often in minutes 	Be aware of tasks or triggers that could move the student up or down the continuum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less thinking more feeling 	Monitor own response (voice, posture, stepping back)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attentive to threat and safety cues 	Calm, monotone voice tone. Fewer words.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>increasingly detached</i> 	Giving the student something tactile to hold
Behaviour:	Rhymes, singing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> property destruction 	Extra time to calm down
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> self harm 	Model calming strategies. Breathe with me.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increasing compliance 	Reinforce needing to feel and be safe.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increasingly resistant to direction, with behaviours evidencing emotional distress (e.g., crying) 	Touch (considering the student’s background and relationship to person touching, and student’s comfort with touch)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> other harm 	Provide proximity but allow space to feel
	Use this time to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the student’s self-calming strategies and plan to add more later Assist the student to engage in one of the self-calming activities Reinforce safety: I am here. You are safe. Notice the student’s preferred survival response (fight/flight, freeze/surrender)

Fear

Brain System: Limbic / Mid brain

External Cues
Body:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>tense*</u> or <u>floppy**</u> • too <u>slow</u> or too <u>quick</u> • <u>reactive</u> • closed body language • <u>fetal position, fainting</u> • <u>kicking, biting, hitting</u>
Breathing Rate:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • too <u>fast</u> • too <u>slow</u> • erratic or very, very <u>slow</u>
Face:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>snarl</u> • <u>phased out</u> • <u>eyes unfocused</u> • skin colour overly <u>flushed</u> / overly <u>pale</u>
Voice:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>loud</u> or <u>no voice</u> • too high- or low-pitched • few words (baby speak) or cannot verbalize what is happening • screaming or silent
Social:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less responsive to cues and environment • resistant to direction • <u>aggressive</u> or <u>compliant/frozen</u> social behaviour • misinterprets socially cues as threatening or negative • moves to paired social activities, or is alone • more aware of group and potential threat; less aware of positive supports in group
<p><u>flight/fight response</u> *</p> <p><u>freeze / surrender response</u> **</p> <p>more external cues for fear</p> 

Sample Strategies to Engage:
Remove from stimuli
Reduce sentences to verbal cues. The time for more words is later.
Be present
Maintain safety for all
Model calming strategies. Breathe with me.
Use visual prompts (e.g., Hand up = stop, pointed index finger to redirect)
Monitor own response (voice, posture, stepping back)
Calm, soothing voice
Give something tactile
Touch (consider the student's background and relationship with the student and the student's comfort with safe touch)
Create separation: from situation, from trigger, from task, from others, from room
Remove trigger
Singing/rhymes
Model calming strategies
Watch closely for timing
Remove the student from environment (create safety)
Create a safe place to calm.
More control on adults part, less on the student's part.
Remember staying in touch with any contagion and group control issues
Communicate (not necessarily verbally) the "I'm not afraid of your heightened state, even though you may be"
Stay present
Calm adults around the student (switch staff if necessary)
Reassurance. I am here. You are safe.
Nurturance, no condemnation
One work cues (e.g., "stop", "danger")

External Cues for Fear:		Strategies to Engage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more disconnected/shut down from surroundings and group 		When at risk to self or others consider containing and isolating from other students, with the presence of a calming attached adult.
Cognition and Attention:		Avoid being punitive or scared or angry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concrete 		Allow time to calm down
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus potentially threatening stimuli 		Get help from another adult to work with other students. Stay with the student.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less processing 		Slow movements (versus rushed and unpredictable)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scattered thoughts 		Primary focus is safety, and safety messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language unclear 		Don't engage in arguments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thinks in minutes and seconds 		Possibly use another room for safe containment and messages of safety.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reactive to the world around 		Increase teacher self-calm
Behaviour:		Safe people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>property destruction</u> 		Try not to react
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>tantrums and increased defiance</u> 		Adults take control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>harm to others</u> 		Avoid being angry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>self harm</u> 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>shut down, lethargic, nonresponsive</i> 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>fetal rocking</i> 		

External Cues	Strategies to Engage
Face:	Sample Strategies to Engage:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>red faced</u> • <i>no colour</i> • eyes glassy 	Protect from any other threatening stimuli
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>blood shot eyes</u> 	Safe people
Body:	Isolate from other students, keep an adult with student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaking • <i>non-responsive</i> • <i>fetal position</i> • <i>releasing body fluids</i>(e.g., urinating) • kicking, hitting, punching, running 	Stay present. Be focussed on student and calm.
Voice:	Safe place to calm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>screaming or primal scream</u> • <i>no voice</i> 	Safety cues only, preferably non-verbal. One word cues (e.g., “stop”, “danger”)
Cognition and Attention:	Nurturance, no condemnation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loss of sense of time (only in the present) • safety only • reflexive (not conscious) 	Calm adults around the student (switch staff if necessary)
Behaviour:	Adults take control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>non-responsive</i> • <u>reflexive hitting, kicking, protecting</u> • <u>aggression</u> • <i>fainting</i> 	Try not to react
<u>flight/fight response</u> *	When at risk to self or others consider containing and isolating from other students, with the presence of a calming attached adult.
<u>freeze / surrender response</u> **	Remember staying in touch with any contagion and group control issues
	Communicate (not necessarily verbally) the “I’m not afraid of your heightened state, even though you may be”
	Practice calming strategies.
	Create separation: from situation, from trigger, from task, from others, from room
	Remove trigger