

Stimulus change.

Stimulus Change is a behavioural strategy used in special education to support students in shifting their attention or engagement from one activity or situation to another. It is based on principles of behaviourism and can help manage transitions, reduce challenging behaviours and promote adaptive functioning across classroom and playground environments.

Stimulus Change refers to deliberately altering the environment or presenting a new cue to signal a shift in expectations, activity, or reinforcement. The goal is to prompt a new behavioural response or break a pattern of behaviour. This technique is often used when:

- A student is becoming dysregulated or noncompliant
- A behaviour needs to be redirected without confrontation
- A transition is difficult
- A new routine or instruction needs to be introduced

Stimulus changes may be **visual, auditory, tactile, social, or environmental**.

Stimulus Change as a Behaviour Crisis Management Strategy

When a student is experiencing distress, dysregulation, or is beginning to escalate towards a crisis (e.g. yelling, self-injury, aggression, bolting), introducing a stimulus change can help “re-set” the environment and support the student to de-escalate without confrontation or punishment. A stimulus change at this point acts as a pattern interrupter—breaking the behavioural momentum, shifting attention, and offering a circuit-breaker for heightened emotional states.

What Is a “Re-set”?

A re-set is a proactive, non-punitive intervention that helps a student:

- Regain control of their behaviour
- Feel emotionally safe
- Transition from dysregulation back to a calm, regulated state
- Stimulus change as a re-set may include:
 - Changing the environment
 - Swapping adult support
 - Presenting a new sensory or social input
 - Redirecting focus using novelty or preferred stimuli

Best Practice Tips

- Pre-plan stimulus changes as part of individual behaviour support plans (IBSPs)
- Use non-verbal cues or minimal language to avoid escalation
- Allow the student to opt in to the new stimulus without pressure
- Ensure the new stimulus is non-demanding, calming, and predictable
- Always debrief later (once regulated), not during escalation.

Sample Visual Re-set Tools

- “Time for a Break” cards
- “Walk with Me” symbols
- “Re-set Zone” posters
- Colour-coded lanyard signals for staff swaps
- This is the introduction of a novel or unexpected event. Examples might include:
 - Have a tantrum yourself
 - Stare into the air and swat imaginary flies
 - Fall down and writhe in pain
 - Pretend to faint
 - Spin and dance around the room
 - Talk to someone who is unseen
 - Ask the student to hold something for you – ‘Hold this for me’
 - Do somersaults
 - Start juggling things
 - Crawl around the floor looking for something small you have ‘dropped’
 - Flap your arms and act like a chicken
 - Pull your shirt over your head and stand still
 - Wear a mask
 - Drop a lot of coins on the floor
 - Bump into something and fall over
 - Start singing the national anthem or the school song
 - Spin like a top
 - Have a coughing attack
 - Ask someone nearby to dance
 - Start a conversation in another language (or gobbledegook).

Stimulus Change Examples in the Classroom

Transition Support

Scenario: A student has difficulty moving from a preferred task (e.g. iPad time) to a less preferred one (e.g. writing).

Stimulus Change Strategy: The teacher dims the lights and plays a calming chime, a signal that iPad time is ending. A different teacher assistant then approaches with a visual schedule card for writing.

Re-set Effect: The chime and change in lighting serve as sensory cues; the change in staff and materials helps reset expectations.

Change of Staff Member

Scenario: A student begins yelling and tearing paper after being asked to start writing.

Stimulus Change Strategy: A different, familiar teacher aide calmly approaches and says, “Let’s go for a walk,” while showing a walk card or using a visual re-set cue.

Re-set Effect: The change in adult support and environment signals a safe circuit breaker.

Behaviour Redirection

Scenario: A student begins to escalate when presented with a difficult task.

Stimulus Change Strategy: The teacher calmly replaces the worksheet with a choice board, giving the student the option to choose an easier task or sensory break.

Re-set Effect: The shift in stimulus (task removal, new visuals) disrupts escalation and gives the student a sense of control.

Change of Task or Materials

Scenario: A student starts throwing materials when struggling with a task.

Stimulus Change: The teacher gently removes the task and places a calming sensory box on the desk without verbal prompting.

Re-set Effect: The new stimulus breaks the pattern and invites self-regulation.

Task Engagement

Scenario: A student is disengaged during group learning.

Stimulus Change Strategy: The staff member introduces a novelty item like a puppet or uses a different voice to re-capture attention.

Why it works: The unexpected change in voice or material re-engages the sensory system and redirects attention.

Lighting or Environmental Shift

Scenario: The classroom becomes too stimulating and a student begins pacing or flapping.

Stimulus Change: Staff dims the lights and plays a calming audio track or white noise.

Re-set Effect: The sensory shift provides immediate relief and a calming reset.

Examples in the Playground

Preventing Unsafe Behaviour

Scenario: A student is showing signs of overstimulation (e.g. yelling, running without direction).

Stimulus Change Strategy: A staff member introduces a new activity like a bubble-blowing game or starts a counting challenge near the student.

Re-set Effect: Redirecting attention through a new sensory or motor task prevents escalation while keeping the student socially engaged.

Facilitating Peer Interaction

Scenario: A student is playing alone repetitively and missing social opportunities.

Stimulus Change Strategy: Staff introduce a new toy or game that naturally involves two players and invite a peer to join.

Re-set Effect: Changing the materials and adding a social cue encourages cooperative play.

Introducing Novel Equipment or Props

Scenario: A student is starting to escalate after a peer conflict.

Stimulus Change: Staff introduces a parachute, bubble machine, or ball game and invites the student to participate.

Re-set Effect: Novelty redirects the student's focus and encourages re-engagement in a safe, structured activity.

Relocating to a Quiet Space

Scenario: A student is becoming overwhelmed in a noisy, crowded area.

Stimulus Change: A staff member quietly gestures toward a preferred quiet spot or sensory tent and walks with the student there.

Re-set Effect: Changing the setting supports emotional regulation and removes the triggering stimuli.

Implementation Tips

Plan Ahead: Predict situations where a stimulus change may be needed (e.g. end of breaks, high-demand tasks).

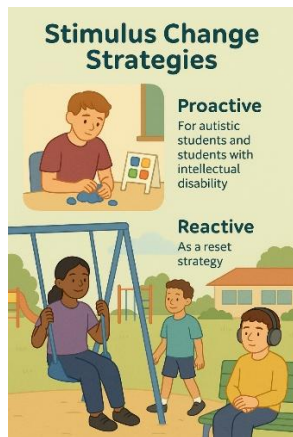
Keep It Neutral: Avoid using stimulus change as a punishment; it should feel like a reset or gentle redirection.

Be Consistent: Use consistent signals (e.g. same music, same visual card) so students learn to associate them with expected behaviours.

Individualise: Match the type of stimulus change (visual, auditory, social) to each student's preferences and needs.

Reinforce Positive Responses: Acknowledge when students respond appropriately to a stimulus change.

Stimulus Change is a powerful and effective re-set strategy during behavioural escalation or crisis situations, particularly for students with disabilities in special education settings. It helps interrupt escalating behaviours and re-engage students in a safe and respectful way. Detailed examples of the use of stimulus change as non-aversive methods to achieve rapid-safe control in a behaviour crisis are provided in the Positive Behaviour Support section and in the School's Code of Student Behaviour (A Manual for Successful PBS in a Queensland Special School).



PROACTIVE STRATEGIES	REACTIVE STRATEGIES
✓ Transition cues	✓ Change of staff member
✓ Novel items or activities	✓ Change of task or material
Changes in lighting or sound	✓ Relocating to a quiet space
✓ New toys or playground games	



Remember we can only use each of the stimulus change strategies once in an extended period. A given strategy may not be effective when it has been previously used in the student's presence as is it loses the surprise aspect.