



Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

brought to you by the San Francisco Special Needs Inclusion/Mental Health Consultation Collaborative
The Special Needs Inclusion Project, Instituto Familiar de la Raza & Edgewood Center

SNIPPET #4: De-Escalation Strategies - Helping Youth Regain Self-Control

As an after school professional working with children and youth, at some point you are likely to find yourself trying to calm “escalating” youth.

Escalating is the term used to describe children and youth who are losing their self-control and becoming aggressive; they are experiencing increased adrenaline and reduced oxygen to the brain.

Interventions must always be done with the idea of helping them regain control and maintain their dignity. For these reasons, **de-escalation strategies need to be simple, clear, and respectful.**

Be proactive *not* reactive

Being proactive is key when preventing escalation. This starts with building positive relationships with the youth and staff you work with. **The relationship between adult and child is the most critical component of discipline – improved relationships lead to improved cooperation.** Understanding our own triggers, buttons, and reactions is also important. Ask yourself how you respond to particular situations. For example, feelings of anger tend to lead to overreaction; fear and confusion tend to lead to under-reaction.

Use few words

- Escalating youth are less able to hear you; discussions of what they did wrong are not useful at this time.
- Simple, straightforward words will help them calm down.
- Clear concise directions can help them regain control.

- Show or tell them what you want them to do; their brains aren’t taking in the “don’t” part.
- Consequences should be saved for a later conversation.

The key is in how directions are delivered. It is important to communicate in a calm, yet firm voice. Give directions in 5 or fewer short words, “Helen, put the chair down now.” Also, if possible, ask questions such as “What’s going on?”

Listen

- Use active listening skills such as reflection and summarizing
- Try to understand what’s going on, what the youth needs.
- Often, feeling that someone has listened and understood them is enough to prevent a crisis.

By using active listening, you are being empathetic and showing youth you want to understand how they are feeling. Offering a safe space where they can talk and share their feelings might be what they need to calm down and regain their self-control.

Re-Direct

- Shift the conversation or activity to something that is less agitating until the youth is regains some control.
- When the youth is calm you can try to deal with the issue in a different way.

Sometimes redirecting youth away from the issue that is upsetting her/him is enough to diffuse the crisis.

Use Self-Control

- Take deep breaths and other measures to keep yourself in control.
- Use your **voice** as a tool in responding to aggression.
- If your voice remains calm, most likely you will remain calm.

Know when to have other staff take over, so you can take a moment to collect yourself, if possible. **Your intervention should not be more extreme than the child's behavior.** Make sure you have good strategies for keeping yourself calm. Students will respond/react to the energy you put out. Aggressive invites aggressive, calm and in control invites calm and in control.

Be Patient

Don't panic – sometimes waiting just a minute and giving the student breathing room will allow him/her to make the right decision about how to handle his/her emotions.

Give Choices

- Most times students will de-escalate if they have viable options to get out of the situation they are in.
- For each choice, **give only two options**, each of which will be okay for you.
- Give them ways to feel they have control over the situation.
- **Never give choices when a child is in danger.**

When we offer kids choices instead of making demands, we can avoid power struggles and/or escalating the situation. Asking a lot of questions and giving choices encourage kids to do the thinking, own the problem, come up with solutions, and take responsibility. Always give choices before resistance or argument.

Be Natural

- Use these techniques as best they suit your style —make them your own.

If you seem different than yourself when working to de-escalate students, they will sense your discomfort and this may escalate the situation.

Get Support

- Seek out others during a crisis – know where others are ahead of time and who can support you if a crisis should occur so that you are not left to deal with the situation by yourself.

It is important to know when a situation requires more support. That is a good time to disengage from the situation and get help from other staff as needed and appropriate. Always remember your job is to ensure safety for all to the best of your ability.

Practicing and implementing de-escalation techniques and strategies will offer increased support to staff when dealing with a difficult situation. Role-playing possible scenarios will give staff confidence to respond effectively to crisis situations. Thus, all staff will understand and speak the same language when implementing learned techniques and strategies, **providing a safe environment for all.**

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