



17 De-escalation Strategies

De-escalation: Using the principals of non-violent resistance and connective parenting in tricky situations during Play Work. We have shared in this Information Sheet some initial thoughts and suggests that might help in certain situations.

Similar to other professions, Play workers can witness, experience and become embroiled in escalating situations caused by 'meltdowns', 'tantrums' or 'bad behaviours'. A fundamental starting point when faced with these situations is to remember that all behaviour is a communication. Borne out of big feelings, frustration, tiredness, age and stage everyone has the capacity to lose their ability to think rationally. When that happens traditional techniques of reasonable discussions quickly give way to punishment, threats, coercion, shaming and embarrassment.

The following information will help to reframe these moments away from - they won't to they can't. Self Regulation and helping others become regulated is key to de-escalating situations allowing the thinking part of the brain to work again.

Further information on why the Rational brain gives way to Flight, Fright, Fawn or Freeze can be found elsewhere. Although we would recommend the extremely accessible online resources from the Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution (SCCR). Other online resources such as ACEs (adverse childhood), Dan Hughes PACE model, the work of Suzanne Zeedyk, Louise Bombér and Lisa Cherry are also well worth a look. Links to some of these can be found in the Further Reading section.

Two main types of escalation

Escalations follow different patterns but are broadly categorised below:

- **Giving in** - Child pushes and other party backs off. Not an active decision although may have good reasons for giving in, e.g. threat of violence.
- **Symmetrical** - Goes up and up until one or both participants explode. Can be dangerous because neither is using thinking part of brain.

De-escalation is about trying to find the midpoint. Try not to react during an escalation and defer your response (if one is needed).

If you are caught in the moment, you too will be drawn into the escalation. Therefore, as hard as it is, try and focus on own self regulation. Think about and try to identify what triggers you have. What sayings, actions or behaviours infuriate you or put you on edge? If you are aware of these triggers and are able to keep them in mind, hopefully with practice they will cease to be so triggering and / or you can learn to avoid them. Remember it will take time to change our own reaction to triggers but it gets easier with practice.

Your actions instead should be focused on minimising risks and lowering the arousal level of the triggered child and / or adult. These actions may include keeping everyone safe – you might need to make a safety plan, remove other children, employee, adults as well as removing objects (throwable or valuable). Stay with the child if at all possible / appropriate.

In summary;

During a 'meltdown' children and adults are in fight/flight/ freeze/ fawn with no ability to reason. They are already overwhelmed – don't add to it. By staying calm, we remain the place of safety and helps to re-build relationship as part of the rupture / repair cycle.

“Conflict as a way of life has become normalised yet it is not the normal way of nurturing and growing human relationships.”
Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution



De-escalation strategies

By choosing to defer your response, concentrating on self regulation and regulating the child you are avoiding both:

- **Joint escalation** – child raises voice, you raise voice; child shouts, you shout; child shouts louder, you shout louder; can end in violence on both sides; AND
- **Giving-in escalation** – child shouts and demands, after a while you give in; child learns they can get their own way if they make enough fuss and repeats pattern.

Strategies are not a one size fits all solution, sorry! Think more of having a bag of tricks / resources that you can dip into. You will need to experiment. Additionally, different things will work at different times, so having a range of tools is important. Colleagues may also find that what works for one doesn't work for another. Be kind to yourself too as it takes time to learn to self regulate and de-escalate.

Humour - In early stages (not when at explosion level)

- Does have to be funny
- Not sarcasm
- Not taking the mickey out of the child

Sensory input - One of most effective (meltdowns often related to sensory overload)

- Use of sensory materials, e.g. Blu tack, chewellery, big balls, chewing / sucking / blowing
- Jumping, hanging bar, being upside down

Distraction

- Do something unexpected
- Narrating what you're seeing

Active listening - Escalations are often about needing to be heard

- Refer back to listening in communication
- Use for good stuff too

Keeping silent – if in doubt ZIP IT!

- Not adding to sensory overload
- Not just stopping talking – explain what you are doing
- Can deep breathe for own self regulation

All of the above techniques benefit from you doing something and letting the child follow – don't tell them what to do. Be prepared however that they might well press harder to try and get a reaction.

Deferring your response

Strike when the iron is cold – not giving in – you are taking planned, delayed actions instead of impulsive, reactive actions.

- Most important part of de-escalation, when escalating a child can't be rational and calm.
- Focused on helping the child.
- Help the child to understand what was happening to them in the moment.
- Help them to link to their emotions, speculate about how they are feeling the emotion. E.g. How was your tummy feeling?
- It's not having the emotion that's the problem, it's how it is expressed. Suggest what they can do – what works for them? Similar to managing happy emotions as these can also be overwhelming.
- Also modelling by the adult on what to do when things go wrong. Deferred response works in all sorts of situations.
- You might need to apologise if you got annoyed. Modelling this helps them to learn how to do it - actually is good to start with an apology, even if you didn't do anything wrong, e.g. 'I'm sorry you were so upset'. Opens the door to coming back into connection.

Further Reading

Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution (SCCR)

<https://www.scottishconflictresolution.org.uk/professionals-and-practitioners-resource>

Overview of ACES (adverse childhood)

<http://www.healthscotland.scot/population-groups/children/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/overview-of-aces>

Dan Hughes, PACE model

<https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>

Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your project, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or admin@smartplaynetwork.org