

Queen's Park Trust

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De-Escalate Aggression

“How can I de-escalate a situation when someone is angry or agitated?”

Types of unacceptable behaviour

- Spitting.
- Verbal abuse (yelled at with offensive language).
- Threatening violence.
- Dealing with aggressive behaviour (sometimes with a weapon).
- Dealing with people affected by alcohol or drugs.
- Being physically assaulted (including kicks, bites and punches).

At a glance

When there are signs of anger or verbal aggression it is important to remember that:

- you need to stay calm
- anger may be a sign that the person is in distress, experiencing fear or frustrated
- it is not possible to reason or problem solve with someone who is enraged
- effective communication skills are the key to settling, resolving and de-escalating a situation.

Use the strategies below to de-escalate a situation:

- Listen to what the issue is and the person's concerns.
- Offer reflective comments to show that you have heard what their concerns are.
- Wait until the person has released their frustration and explained how they are feeling.
- Look and maintain appropriate eye contact to connect with the person.

- Incline your head slightly, to show you are listening and give you a non-threatening posture.
- Nod to confirm that you are listening and have understood.
- Express empathy to show you have understood.

It is not your job to stop the person being angry, but these steps may help to make the person feel calmer. It is only then that you can look at how to deal with the situation and their concerns.

If you encounter someone who is angry or upset the following verbal de-escalation techniques may help you to calm them down.

There are two important concepts to keep in mind:

- Reasoning with an enraged person is not possible. Your only objective should be to reduce the level of arousal so that discussion becomes possible.
- We are all driven to fight, flight or freeze when scared. However, to calm down someone who is angry or upset you must appear to be calm yourself, even if you aren't.

10 things you can do

1. Appear calm, centred and self-assured, even though you might not feel that way!
2. Remember you are not trying to do anything except calm the person down.
3. Use a modulated, low and monotonous tone of voice.
4. Treat the person with dignity and respect. Ignore insults and don't be judgemental.
5. Allow extra physical space between you – about four times your usual distance.
6. Empathise with feelings but not with the behaviour (e.g. "I understand that you are upset, but it is not okay for you to get in the way.")
7. Ask questions like "Help me to understand what you are upset about..." rather than "how are you feeling?".
8. Suggest simple alternatives e.g. "Let's move over there where we can see better".
9. Give choices where possible in which both alternatives are positive and safe (e.g. "Would you like me to take you to a taxi so you can go to the hospital and be there with your friend, or would you prefer to go home first?").
10. Stay safe and know you have the choice to leave at any time.

10 things to avoid

1. Don't rush in. Take a few moments to assess the situation, look at the person's body language, listen to their tone of voice and make a plan (including how to get away if things get out of hand).
2. Don't get loud or try to yell over a screaming person.
3. Don't ask how a person is feeling or try to interpret their feelings.
4. Don't respond to abusive questions, just ignore them.
5. DO NOT SMILE. This could be misinterpreted as mockery.
6. Do not touch, even though touching may seem appropriate and usual in your peer group. Agitated people may misinterpret physical contact as hostile or threatening.
7. Do not argue or try to convince - give choices, not explanations.
8. Keep your hands out of your pockets, up and available to protect yourself.
9. Don't point or shake your finger.
10. Avoid constant eye contact - allow the person to break their gaze and look away.

Trust your instincts - if your efforts to de-escalate the situation aren't working ...

STOP!

You will know within 2 or 3 minutes if you are making a difference. If the person isn't calming down, won't leave on their own or with you, call for help or leave yourself.

There is nothing magic about talking someone down from a highly agitated state. You are transferring your sense of calm by taking a genuine interest in what the person is trying to tell you. Show them you are listening and tell them firmly and respectfully what you want them to do.

If at any time the person threatens to harm themselves or others, contact the police on '999'.

DE-ESCALATION How You Can Help Defuse Potentially Violent Situations

De-Escalation is a method to prevent potential violence. Individuals are encouraged to use purposeful actions, verbal communications, and body language to calm a potentially dangerous situation.

Your safety and the safety of others is the highest priority. Maintain a safe distance and avoid being alone with an individual who is combative or potentially violent. If there is a risk of imminent violence, remove yourself from the situation and seek safety.

Know your limits. Keep in mind that some individuals may be more adept in applying these techniques. Know your own vulnerabilities and tendencies and recognize that sometimes the best intervention is knowing when to seek additional help.

Obtain Help. If you feel the individual or situation is escalating and violence may occur, call for help from your security staff or local law enforcement and move yourself to a safe location.

Be aware of your non-verbal communications. Ensure your tone, facial expressions, body language, and gestures relay calm and empathy.

Remain respectful and courteous. Address the individual with civility and use phrases such as “please” and “thank you.”

De-Escalation Techniques: A Guide for Parents Experiencing Aggression from their Child

When facing child-on-parent abuse, it is common to become overwhelmed in the moment and not know how to diffuse the situation.

When parenting becomes overwhelming, especially if your child’s behaviour escalates to aggression or abuse, feeling isolated and unsure is common. It can be incredibly hard to reach out, especially when your instinct is to protect and care for your child, no matter what.

Understanding the Escalation Cycle

The escalation cycle refers to the predictable stages that can occur during an intense emotional episode. Recognising these stages can help you identify signs early and respond effectively, reducing the chance of reaching crisis levels. Here’s a simplified look at the cycle:

1. Calm

The child is relaxed, displaying typical behaviour, with no signs of distress.

2. Trigger

A situation or stressor—such as a disagreement, sensory overload, or disappointment—initiates strong emotions.

3. Agitation

Early signs of frustration or discomfort appear; the child may seem restless, anxious, or more reactive than usual from their partner.

4. Acceleration

Emotions intensify, with visible signs like heightened frustration, raised voice, or aggressive body language.

5. Peak

Aggression reaches its highest level, potentially including verbal outbursts or physical aggression.

6. De-Escalation

Emotions begin to settle, though the child may still appear defensive, guarded, or tense.

7. Post-Crisis Depletion

The child starts to calm down but may be tired, withdrawn, or unresponsive, reflecting the energy spent during the peak.

8. Recovery

A return to calm; the child may feel regret, shame, or simply exhaustion, creating an opportunity to reconnect and reflect.

Each stage presents an opportunity for intervention. By recognising early signs of escalation, parents can often take preventive steps to avoid a full crisis. While not every situation can be prevented, creating a supportive, low-stress environment and establishing clear boundaries can help reduce the frequency and intensity of aggressive incidents over time.

Prevention: Building a Calmer Environment

Prevention is always the ideal approach, though not always easy. By working on ways to defuse triggers and encourage emotional regulation, you may be able to avoid reaching the crisis stage altogether. Here are some strategies for setting a foundation for calm:

Set up predictable routines

Many children respond well to routines, as they reduce uncertainty and can help children feel more secure.

Encourage healthy outlets for emotions

Physical activity, art, or writing can be great ways for your child to express and process complex emotions before they build up.

Model calmness

Showing calm responses during stressful situations can help your child learn to mirror this approach, even in difficult moments.

Top Tips for De-Escalation During Challenging Moments

When emotions run high, these techniques can help you stay grounded and offer a calming presence for your child. While it's natural to feel frustrated or even fearful, having tools to help you manage these moments can make a difference

Pause & Breathe

When you feel your own emotions rising, take a moment to breathe deeply and ground yourself. This helps you remain present and steady, setting a tone that can influence your child to settle as well.

Use a Calm Tone and Simple Words

Respond with a soft, steady voice and choose your words carefully. Simple language can help your child absorb what you're saying, and a gentle tone can be soothing even when words alone can't solve the issue.

Validate Their Feelings Without Endorsing Behaviour

Acknowledge your child's emotions to show that you understand without reinforcing negative behaviours. For example, saying, "I see you're upset. That must feel hard," can help them feel heard without validating aggressive actions.

Provide Choices to Empower Them

Giving simple choices helps your child feel a sense of control, which can reduce frustration. Choices like, "Would you like to take a break in your room or sit here with me?" can redirect them in a positive way.

Set Clear, Positive Boundaries

Firm but gentle boundaries help establish what behaviours are acceptable. Use positive language like, “I want us both to stay safe” to reinforce that you’re working together to avoid harm.

Offer a Time-Out for Both of You

If emotions are running high, it’s okay to suggest a cooling-off period. A few minutes apart can give you both space to calm down and return to the situation with clearer minds.

Reconnect with Warmth After the Incident

After emotions have cooled, reconnect with warmth and compassion. Reassure your child that you care for them, which helps them process feelings of guilt or shame and shows that love is steady, even during hard times.