

BEHAVIOR · ALL GRADES

De-Escalation Script

When a child is in crisis

What 'de-escalation' actually means

When a child is in crisis — meltdown, severe upset, fight-or-flight response — the goal is NOT to fix the issue, get them back to work, or impose consequences. The goal is to bring their nervous system back from crisis to calm. Until that happens, nothing else can. The thinking brain is offline. Reasoning, threats, consequences, and explanations all bounce off because the part of the brain that processes them isn't available. De-escalation is the patient, deliberate work of bringing them back. It is one of the most important skills in primary teaching, and one most teachers learn through painful experience rather than training.

Phase 1 — Stop everything else

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| <p>Get help if needed</p> <p>If you have a TA, a senior colleague nearby, or you can send a child for help — get a second adult. Especially if there's a safety issue.</p> | <p>Move other children if possible</p> <p>An audience of 27 makes everything worse. If you can, send the rest of the class to another space (the library, another teacher, the hall). Failing that, redirect their attention.</p> |
| <p>Lower your voice</p> <p>Whatever volume you were at — quieter. The child's brain is interpreting volume as danger. Quiet voice = safety signal.</p> | <p>Slow your movements</p> <p>Sudden movements trigger more fight-or-flight. Move slowly, predictably. Approach side-on, not face-on.</p> |

Phase 2 — Connect, don't correct

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| <p>Get to their level</p> <p>Sit down. Crouch. Don't tower over them. Children in crisis perceive height as threat.</p> | <p>Use minimal language</p> <p>Short, simple. 'You're safe.' 'I'm here.' 'I won't go anywhere.' Long sentences won't process.</p> |
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| <p>Don't ask questions</p> <p>Questions require the thinking brain. The thinking brain isn't online. Wait. Don't ask 'what's wrong?' or 'why are you doing this?'</p> | <p>Validate, don't fix</p> <p>'I can see this is hard.' 'It looks like you're really upset.' Don't say 'don't worry' or 'calm down' — those dismiss.</p> |
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What to say (and what NOT to say)

| Helpful | Unhelpful |
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| You're safe. | Why are you doing this? |
| I'm here. | Calm down right now. |
| I'll wait. | Stop crying. |
| You don't have to talk yet. | What's wrong with you? |
| This is hard. I see that. | You're being silly. |
| Take your time. | If you don't stop I'll call your parents. |
| I'm not going anywhere. | We'll discuss your behavior later. |
| When you're ready, we can talk. | Look at me when I'm talking to you. |

Phase 3 — Wait for the wave to pass

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| <p>Crisis is a wave</p> <p>It rises, peaks, and falls. From peak intensity, expect at least 15-30 minutes for a child's body to fully return to baseline. Sometimes longer.</p> | <p>Don't rush re-entry</p> <p>Returning to lessons too soon while still emotionally raw is when secondary outbursts happen. Better to be patient than to re-trigger.</p> |
| <p>Offer water</p> <p>Cold water has physiological calming effect. Drinking slowly is also a regulation activity. 'Would you like some water?' is a low-stakes offer.</p> | <p>Co-regulate, don't lecture</p> <p>Sit nearby. Do something quiet yourself. Your calm presence is doing the work, not your words.</p> |

Phase 4 — Reconnect



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| <p>Don't debrief immediately</p> <p>When you think they're back to baseline, don't launch straight into 'now, about what happened.' Wait at least 30 minutes. Often best the next morning.</p> | <p>Reconnect first</p> <p>When you do come back to it, START with reconnection. 'Hey. Yesterday was hard. We're OK.' THEN talk about what happened.</p> |
| <p>Restorative conversation</p> <p>Use the 6-question script. Focus on understanding, not punishment.</p> | <p>Repair if needed</p> <p>Was anything damaged? Anyone hurt? What would actually help repair? Let the child propose.</p> |

Things that almost always make it worse

- **THREATS.** 'If you don't stop I'll...' — adds fear, doesn't reduce it.
- **ULTIMATUMS.** 'You either stop now or...' — corner the child, escalation increases.
- **PUBLIC HUMILIATION.** Naming and shaming during the crisis or after, in front of peers — guarantees the child won't trust you.
- **LOGIC.** 'But you HAVE to do it because...' — logic isn't available right now.
- **PHYSICAL CONFRONTATION.** Almost never helpful. If physical safety is at issue, get specialist help, don't try to grab a child.
- **ANGER.** Yours. Even justified anger escalates. Stay calm or get someone else who can.
- **'WHY?' QUESTIONS.** They don't know yet. They will, in a few hours.

After the crisis

Once the child is back to baseline, look after yourself too. De-escalation is exhausting. The child has had a crisis but you've been holding the calm. Take 5 minutes when you can. **LOG WHAT HAPPENED.** Briefly: time, what triggered it, how it went, what helped, what didn't. Patterns reveal themselves over weeks. **NOTIFY** parents (calmly, not punitively). They need to know. **FLAG** to SENDCo or pastoral lead. Repeated crises need a wider plan. **BE KIND TO YOURSELF.** Even when it goes badly, you are doing extraordinarily hard work. Most jobs don't require you to be the calm in someone else's storm. Yours does.

