



# A WAY OF BEING WITH CHILDREN

## The Importance of De-Escalation

Understanding and Responding to Your Child's Big Emotions

### Understanding De-Escalation

One of the greatest challenges of parenting is when a child becomes overwhelmed with big feelings (such as anger, sadness, worry, fear, frustration, embarrassment), and has a difficult time managing these emotions and calming down. It is important to understand that when children are overcome by strong emotions, their ability to think clearly and make good decisions is impaired, and they often struggle to control their own behaviors. They may cry, scream, break things, and/or harm or threaten to harm themselves or others.

These behaviors can feel confusing, upsetting, overwhelming, embarrassing, and at times even frightening for parent/caregivers. These, however, are the times when your child needs your help and support the most to prevent a situation from getting worse, but parents/caregivers often do not know what to do or how to best help their child.

De-escalation is a term that refers to the strategies that you can use to calm a child who is experiencing intense, overwhelming feelings and/or whose behavior appears out-of-control. The goal of de-escalation is to reduce the intensity of the situation and guide the child back toward a state of emotional and behavioral control, calm, and safety.



### Losing Control

Why do children have big feelings, big behaviors, and lose control?

- 1. Developmental factors:** Children's brains are still developing, making it hard for them to regulate emotions or calm themselves without support. They may express emotions through tantrums or withdrawal because they lack coping skills.
- 2. Individual child factors:** Every child is unique; sensitive temperaments or unmet physical and emotional needs (e.g., hunger, tiredness, or feeling unsafe) can make managing stress more difficult and lead to big reactions.
- 3. Parent/caregiver factors:** Children mirror the emotions and behaviors of caregivers. If caregivers struggle with their own feelings, it can negatively affect the child's ability to regulate emotions.
- 4. Family and environmental stressors:** Sensory overload, routine disruptions, or exposure to adversity or trauma can overwhelm children, making it harder for them to control emotional or behavioral outbursts.

# Supporting Your Child During Big Emotions

What should you, as a parent or caregiver, do when their child is having big feelings, big behaviors, or is out of control? Here are some helpful tips and techniques to assist you in best supporting your child.

1. **Stay calm and regulate your own emotions:** stay calm to help your child feel safe and soothed. If needed, pause and take a moment to gather your thoughts before responding.
2. **Use non-threatening language and body language:** speak in a calm, steady voice and avoid threatening words or intimidating gestures. Lower yourself to the child's level and use open, non-aggressive body language.
3. **Acknowledge and validate the child's feelings:** show empathy by acknowledging your child's emotions (e.g., "I see you're upset.") and validating their experiences to help them feel understood.
4. **Give the child space:** allow your child to retreat to a quiet place if safe and needed. Reassure them by saying, "I'm here when you're ready to talk," and give them time to calm down.
5. **Use re-direction to shift focus:** help your child refocus by suggesting a positive or neutral activity, such as playing, coloring, or going for a walk, to break the escalation cycle.
6. **Use physical comfort:** offer physical affection, like a hug or sitting close, but respect your child's boundaries if they need space.
7. **Offer comforting sensory activities:** sensory activities, like hugging a soft toy or using a stress ball, can help children calm down and feel comforted.
8. **Offer choices:** empower your child by providing two simple, acceptable choices, such as "Would you like to calm down in your room or sit with me and breathe together?"
9. **Avoid power struggles:** focus on calming your child rather than reasoning with them during intense emotions. Address the underlying issue later.
10. **Use breathing techniques with child:** practice calming breathing techniques, like Color Breathing or 5-Finger Breathing, when your child is calm so they can use them in stressful moments.
11. **Use problem-solving:** once calm, guide your child to identify solutions to the issue they faced, helping them develop better coping and decision-making skills.

## When to Seek Help

At times, a child's big feelings and behaviors may become unmanageable and may even become frightening to parent/caregiver, especially when a parent/caregiver is concerned that their child may be a danger to him- or herself or to someone else. If you are unable to de-escalate your child's big feelings or behaviors and are concerned that your child is in immediate danger or risk of self-harm, suicide, or harming someone else do not wait for things to improve, seek help right away. **If your child is in crisis and you need immediate assistance, here are steps you can take:**

- **Call 911** for emergency transport to a hospital or psychiatric facility.

- If you can safely transport, take your child to an **Emergency Room (ER)** for evaluation.
- **Mobile Crisis Response Teams** evaluate the situation and provide guidance. For Palm Beach County, **call 211** for immediate crisis services or contact the **Mobile Crisis Team** at **(561) 494-1000**.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** Call or text **988** (Available 24/7).
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text **HOME** to **741741** (24/7)
- Local to Palm Beach County:
  - **Palm Beach County Mental Health Department:** (561) 274-3100.
  - **Children's Crisis Stabilization Unit:** (561) 383-7450.

Get more resources at: [www.centerforchildcounseling.org/awayofbeing](http://www.centerforchildcounseling.org/awayofbeing)

