



## 6 Steps to De-escalating Behavior

There are many things that can trigger concerning behavior. Some things are easy to see, like peer conflict. Other things may be harder to see, like past trauma, or when youth feel overwhelmed, tired or are worried about a friend.

The 6 Steps to De-escalating Behavior gives youth development professionals a clear response to youth behavior, builds connections between youth development professionals and youth, and helps youth feel safe. De-escalation is not problem-solving. Instead, de-escalation brings the intensity of the situation down and helps youth get to a place where they are ready to problem-solve. When two youth are engaged in a conflict, de-escalation can be used as the first “in the moment” response (with one or both youth) to help them get to a place where they can start to reframe conflict. De-escalation is mostly non-verbal. It requires being mindful of your gestures, expressions, movements and tone of voice. It also requires paying close attention to youth actions and body language.

### 1. Approach Calmly

Walk toward the young person. If possible, stand between one and five feet away from them. Keep an open body posture and breathe deeply. Focus on your response and think positive thoughts like “I can handle this,” or “I can stay calm.” The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence’s Meta Moment can be a useful way for a staff member to prepare to “Approach Calmly.”

### 2. Describe What You See

Point out the young person’s actions and body language using a neutral tone of voice. For example, “I hear you. You are yelling and throwing the game pieces.” This shows the young person that you have noticed them and are fully present with them in the moment.

### 3. Read the Situation

Observe the young person’s body language and breathing to determine whether they are ready to talk.

Youth who are breathing evenly and have an open posture may be ready to talk about what happened. Keep in mind that non-verbal cues and signals vary by culture. If the young person seems ready to talk, ask, “What happened?” Make sure to use a calm voice to show you truly care about what happened to them, even if their actions negatively affected the activity or someone else.

Youth who are breathing heavy and have a tense posture may not be ready to talk. They won’t hear you if they aren’t calm. Offer a calming statement such as, “Let’s breathe,” or “You can handle this.” Expect differences in what youth find calming. One young person may yell, “No, I can’t” when they hear, “You can handle this.” Another youth may find the same statement helpful. There is not one magical statement to calm all youth. Use a short phrase and speak from the heart. For example, “I see this is difficult,” or “I am here to help.”



#### 4. Acknowledge Feelings

Allow the young person to label their feelings by inviting them to share. Sometimes it will be difficult for a young person to identify how they are feeling, especially if they are having strong feelings. Watch and listen carefully for the real message. If you are not getting a response from the young person and still aren't sure what is going on, it is okay to simply acknowledge them by saying, "I see you," or "I hear you." Sometimes youth will open up if you say something like, "That was a big reaction. What's going on?" Gestures, facial expressions and tone make all the difference.

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#### 5. Give Choices

Give concrete choices to bring the intensity down and diffuse a tense situation. Remember that youth cannot problem-solve when they are upset. It's important to give them choices until they get there.

Some examples are:

- "Do you want to take a break in the gym or the director's office?"
- "Would you like to try an active or a quiet activity to help you work through what's going on?"
- "Do you want me or someone else to help you?"
- "Do you want to talk or be left alone?"

Staff should have a variety of choices prepared. Make sure youth are never given the choice to be alone with just one other staff member or peer.

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#### 6. Pause and Support

When a young person is upset, they often cannot think clearly or use coping skills. Pause and give them time to think through the choices. Allowing time can also give youth a chance to reflect. Be flexible whenever you can. For example, if you gave them a choice to take a break in the director's office and they want to take a break at the reception desk, be flexible and give them some control over the situation. Remember, this process is mostly non-verbal. Use your movements and facial expressions to show the young person you are there for them. Walk alongside them or give them an understanding look.

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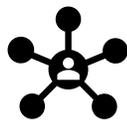
2. Describe What You See



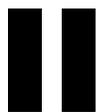
3. Read the Situation



4. Acknowledge Feelings



5. Give Choices



6. Pause and Support



## Tips for De-escalating Concerning Behavior

**Make Time for Reflection:** To respond to behavior with compassion, youth development professionals need to view concerning behavior as an expression of what the youth is thinking and feeling. Take time to talk with staff about concerning behavior by asking the following questions: What is going on for this young person? What are they trying to say? What is causing stress in their life? What is happening in their neighborhood? How can we talk with them to figure out where the behavior is coming from?

**Set Up Spaces and Activities:** Create spaces and activities in your Club that are specifically designed to help youth calm down. Ask them what they find calming and let them help design the spaces. Examples could include: cool down corners in each program space, a dedicated calming room, or an area youth can use to get excess energy out.

**Plan the Concrete Choices Ahead of Time:** It can be difficult for staff to think of choices when they are focused on supporting a young person with de-escalation. It helps tremendously to have the choices ready before they are needed. Think through the choices you can offer. When thinking through those choices, make sure you provide choices that follow established safety policies and avoid one-on-one isolation with youth, staff and peers.

**Coach Staff in the Moment:** Give cues to staff in the moment to help them remember the six steps.

