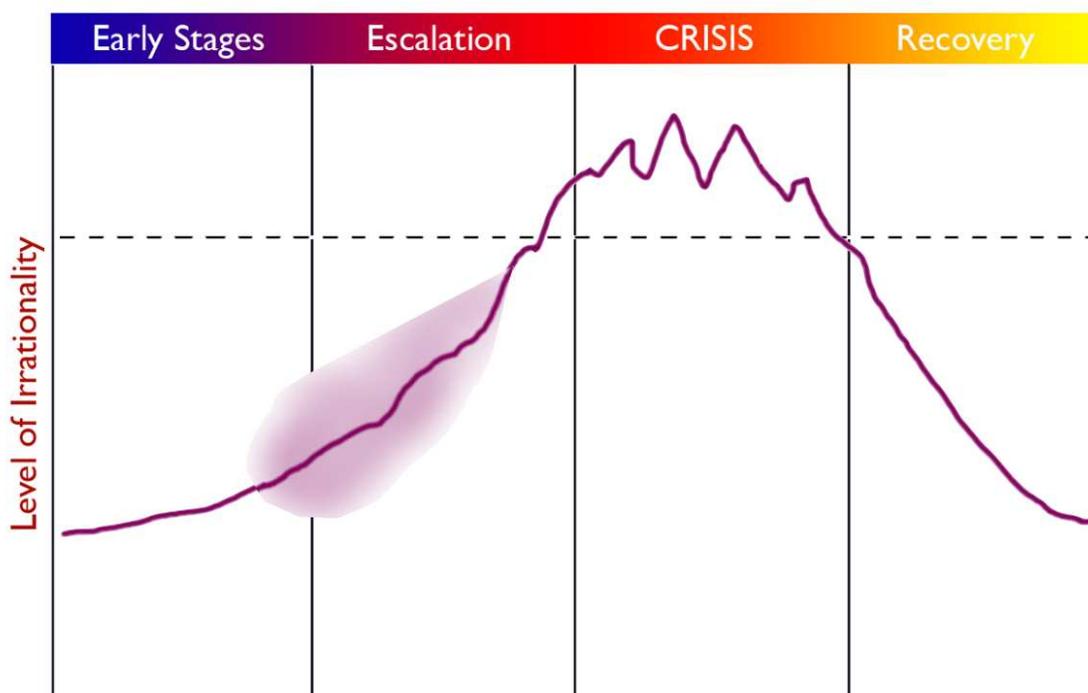


Behavior De-escalation Skills for Youth Workers Gary Russell, Evergreen Shelter Program

When people first start working with at-risk youth, there is a “fear factor.” “How will I do if the kids challenge me, or get angry, or even threaten me?” Each staff has their own particular “worst case” scenario. One of my colleagues dreads the sobbing, teenage-girl-scenario more than anything else. Others might wonder how they will do with older, big, gang affiliated boys. Learning these skills can do much to assuage these fears. You build confidence knowing how to avoid conflict and de-escalate emotional intensity. Over time, one realizes for the most part, these are just kids. The pleasant interactions far outweigh the scary moments. When you become more skilled, you will see a potential crisis as a challenge that you can manage...and an opportunity to teach long-lasting skills to youth. So, let us begin building your tool kit.



This chart shows the course of an emotional crisis. Some hurt, challenge, frustration, unmet needs, or maybe even injustice, can trigger the escalation. If the child has been stuffing these emotions for a while and is not too skilled in managing them, these feelings can flame into a full-blown tantrum. The child may escalate because s/he has had luck with manipulation in the past. At the Evergreen Shelter, we try to avoid they “crisis” stage like the plague. At that level, the child is more irrational. People could get hurt. (Hmm, it might be me.) So, we try to head things off before they get to this point. Do your work on the front end so that it doesn’t morph into a major melt down.

Early Stages- Be proactive. Try to avoid the necessity for a crisis intervention with masterful prevention techniques. Experienced counselors address tension and conflict at the first sign of smoke. Newbies tend to go around putting out fires. When you see tension, pull people aside and talk it out. It might mean pulling the van over for a discussion and seat reassignments. It might mean pulling together a mini-group to discuss the volume or tension in the house. There are

many times the counselor needs to be directly supervising the kids and must manage by walking around. Occasionally, adults need to run interference if impulsive youth are inadvertently pushing other children's buttons. Don't just let it spin. Take action.

The Right Mindset

Avoid Polarity- You should basically have the policy that "if you got yourself in a power struggle, you blew it."

What is polarity? Relational polarity happens when people take opposing sides. It almost always is framed in terms of authority versus subordinate. The adult is pitted against the child, me versus you, staff against the kids, master versus peon, us versus them. The battle lines have been drawn and the fight is ready to begin. It's implied at times when a parent says, "I'm the adult." Or, "As long as you live in my house, you will do as I say." Or, "When you start paying the bills..."

Why is polarity a bad thing? Well, for starters, if you push, youth will push back. The "push/push, becomes a "lose/lose" situation. Power struggles do not promote safety and adults should be fostering safe households and youth group environments.

The other major reason polarity and the subsequent power struggles are to be avoided is that they do not teach responsibility. The, "I'm in charge," approach emphasizes external control at the expense of fostering the child's ability to control him- or herself. It also emphasizes authority over relationship. The approach doesn't help children internalize values or the principles behind the rules. By the time a child reaches 18, we hope they have internalized values and can think for themselves. Like all skills, they will need a lot of opportunities to practice along the way.

I suspect the strong need for control reflects some unmet need(s) on the part of the caregiver. As caregivers, if our ego needs go up, the safety goes down. Some children are submissive when dominated, at least until they leave the home. The primary lesson children learn in these situations is to either, "fear of authority or defy authority." Typically, children have little respect for persons in their lives that were too controlling.

OK, this critique of the controlling parent may sound harsh. However, "commander-in-chief" parenting is not as bad as "permissive parenting." It at least lays some foundation for a child. After the child has struggled through the pain of excessive rebellion when the parental limits are no longer being applied, s/he tends to come back to some moderate position. Strict parenting also holds a child to high standards, "great expectations," which in turn may build some skills.

To stay on task, I will just mention, the ideal parenting puts a lot of responsibility on the child. It uses structure, positive discipline and teaching to foster interdependence, respect and responsibility. It is relational. The focus is more on helping the child develop internal control than forcing the child to bend to external control or, worse, putting children in situations where there is no control/no limits/no boundaries.

How does one avoid polarity?

Ultimatums vs. Choices- **Ultimatums** are the quintessential expression of external control. "Do it or else." They necessarily pit the authority figure against the subordinate. Guess what? Kids have egos, too, especially as they move into adolescence. If you push, they will push back. Adults with ill-intent have used this knowledge to provoke responses that escalate conflict.

When you offer **choices**, the child can internalize the conflict, placing it in the child's head, so the parent/caregiver can avoid bumping heads. Here are some tips on offering choices:

*Lead with the preferred choice, the path of least resistance.

*Be confident you can follow through with either option.

*Step aside for a few minutes to let the child "save face," and give the cognitive dissonance a chance to spur some action.

Learning to package everything as a choice is an art. If you're stuck, consult with a coworker or other parent for ideas. There is another benefit to offering choices. Contrary to some deterministic theories on human behavior, I believe humans are capable of independent action. They are transcendent. When you offer choices, you are empowering a child and affirming their personhood.

Contingency Consequences- Contingency consequences are a great way to put responsibility back on a child. Instead of going "head to head" with the child, you outwait them. Contingency consequences also have a positive feel as you get to say, "yes" instead of, "no." Here are some examples:

Child: "Can I watch TV?"

Parent: "Sure, as soon as your chore is done."

Child: "I want to go over to Mike's and play."

Parent: "Sure, as soon as your homework is done."

Child: "Can I have dessert?"

Parent: "Sure, as soon as you finish your supper."

At the Evergreen Shelter, we use this approach when children get suspended from school. We have them do 3 hours of work to get them familiar with their employment options should they not graduate from High School. We emphasize that they can watch TV and play outside as soon as their work is done. We continue to encourage and guide them along the way, but extend their time if they are slacking.

Make sure time is truly "on your side." If kids fail to do a "time sensitive" chore, trade their chores for one of yours when you have time. It works like this: "If you don't have the dishes done by 11:30, I'll do them for you. Then, you'll do one of my chores for me. I have to warn you. My chores are harder than dishes and they will start Saturday morning."

State your expectations in a positive way- Tell kids what you want them to do rather than what you don't want them to do. This is positive imaging. If they can conceive it; they can achieve it.

This is super important:

■Go over your expectations for a task or an activity.

■Break it down to a few essential rules.

■Go over the consequences if they should fail to follow the basic rules.

■Get their agreement on the rules AND consequences.

Then, if they blow it, it's their fault, not yours. This makes the follow through much easier. It also teaches children they can earn privileges by exhibiting positive behavior.

Don't Gunnysack- This tends to be more of an adult problem. I see it when romances go sour. A partner will approach a conflict carrying a whole history of past hurts. They don't really clear the slate, forgive and start fresh. Each engagement is an opportunity to review all of the

past instances where the person has hurt them. Adults should not come primed, expecting things to go bad based on prior bad interactions. If you assume things will go poorly, they probably will. Start fresh. "OK, things didn't go very well yesterday. But, today is a new day. Let's try to have some fun together." One of our veteran counselors emphasizes the need to start every shift with a "meet and greet." Make a personal connection and start out with positive expectations and a smile.

Not hanging on to the past is particularly relevant when working with ADHD children. If you can get over it, they already got over it ten minutes ago.

The Shelter's house structure incorporates these principles. Most of our consequences only last 24 hours. The child does not feel like they have dug their hole so deep, they can't get out. You want to keep kids focused on "light at the end of the tunnel." With this in mind, our staff are not strong advocates of extended "grounding."

Effective Confrontation:

Make statements. Don't ask questions. When you ask someone a question, you are really asking them to defend themselves. Their defenses have to go up. Statements don't have that same effect. They don't call people on the carpet, so to speak.

As a side note, never ask a liar if they lied. Lying is a child's number one defense. You should make sure you have the evidence and then consequence accordingly. This becomes more significant with certain issues that are heavily defended. This defensiveness and duplicity is the hallmark of addiction and sexually inappropriate behavior. At some point, you let the person know, "We're not asking if you did this. We know you have. Now it's time to take responsibility and start to work on it."

The key characteristic of a good counselor is assertiveness. Follow your gut and don't let things slide. We all need honest feedback. Communication is like a mirror. You hold it up and the person learns important things about themselves. This can be very therapeutic, especially for the person with a large blind spot (remember the Johari window?).¹

Here is how to package a statement:

1) Describe what you see. Like an umpire, call it like you see it. Make thinking statements. If you are merely describing reality, there is not much room for argument.

2) Describe your emotional response to what you see. Again, kids can't argue with how you feel about what you see. A typical lead-in sounds like this: "I'm not comfortable with _____."

When you combine these two statements together, you have a very powerful, direct and respectful confrontation. Will the person necessarily acquiesce? No, not necessarily, but it increases your chances tremendously. If nothing else, you got it off your chest in a respectful manner. The impact of your assertive statement may be realized an hour or day later.

Things get Territorial- When kids approach the "dotted line," they become more irrational, more animal. You have to appreciate this. Your job is to be the rational anchor so you can pull them back down to reality. When the child is flying by the emotional seat of their pants, they quit hearing your content. They are keying in to your body language and posture. So,...

¹ (Luft and Ingham 1955)

Keep your distance- If normal distance is about 3 feet, you need 6 or 7 feet between you and an escalated child.

Present profile (the professor routine)- Try not to look imposing or threatening. The least defensive posture you can assume is the professor stance- hand on the elbow and your other hand on your chin. You look contemplative, not aggressive. You're casual, taking your time and thinking things over.

Use less eye contact- Don't give them the evil eye or engage them intensely.



No staring contests.

Lower your voice- The youth will be escalating, maybe even screaming. You don't want to follow suit. Remember, you are modeling self-control and communicating, "mellowness." Make them come down to your level, not visa versa.

Be Mindful of Your Environment- Try to subdue lighting and background noise. As the air becomes charged with tension, a proactive parent or counselor will want to turn down the lights, the radio, the TV and generally mellow things out. Some environments are very noisy. When kids are interacting in these environments, they are almost yelling to hear each other. It doesn't take much to cross this threshold and start screaming.

You must be very mindful of any potential audience. When a child tantrums in the checkout line at Wal-Mart, they are hoping the audience will humiliate their mom or dad into complying with their demand(s) to avoid embarrassment. If you leave all your items in the cart and carry the child into the bathroom, the whole dynamic changes. Melodramatic youth will stage for their peers. Again, any spectators fuel the flames.

Removing the audience will be the job of your coworker or partner if you have one. Sometimes you have to think outside the box. Try to lure the youngster you need to confront away from the audience before you confront him or her. If the child is unwilling to join you, you might have better luck removing the audience, leaving the child behind. At the Shelter, we shut down the house, locking most doors to limit the "contagion" if we worry that a child might escalate. This can be done as a precaution. It does not necessarily mean anyone is in trouble. You are just preparing for a contingency. We typically stay in this mode until the conflict has been resolved.

In some situations, say a college class, the audience may have a moderating effect. One would need to judge this in the moment.

Preparing for Intensity

Again, avoid polarity- "I am not going to get into a power struggle."

Self talk- You are your own greatest influence. There are some things you really want to tell yourself as you anticipate a conflict. You'll need a big dose of professional detachment. If you are the parent, pretend this is not your kid. Pretend you have been given this kid as a project. Tell yourself to remain calm. Act, don't react. You need to model control. And, most importantly-

"Don't take the bait." When kids start to escalate, they will try to share the pain. Some kids have a history of crisis and drama and would like nothing better than to get you on board. Don't let them hook you.

When youth are escalating the verbal gloves tend to come off first. They will basically look you over and speculate, 'Now if I were her/him or if I were you, where would I be insecure? That is right where they will go. Now, I can forewarn you, but they may be nastier than you imagine. If it hurts, don't let them know that it hurt. Just look concerned and say, "I'm sorry you feel that way." Or, "You seem to be going out of your way to be as hurtful as possible." Try to anticipate their ploy and use your best poker face. You can go after an apology and give them some feedback once they have de-escalated.

To see a fine example of letting the insults wash over you, leaving you unfrazzled and unfazed, watch the YouTube clip of Whoopi Goldberg versus Winona Ryder in "Girl, Interrupted." The scene I would like you to see begins at the 1:30 minute mark.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzLFZN-k0pI> ²

When things get intense, you need a big dose of professional detachment.

Get analytical- One great way not to take things personally, is to look beyond the child's disrespectful and provocative behavior. You can see what they are doing; now try to figure out why.

Anger typically is not a primary emotion. It is secondary at best. I find that most often the child has been hurt. They're not comfortable admitting they have been hurt, so they convert the hurt to anger. If you can help them realize they were really hurt, you are giving them valuable feedback. This is counseling, helping the child gain insight into what they are really feeling. If they can identify the driving emotion and deal with it, they have come a long way.

They may feel frustrated. Frustration, by definition, is wanting to do one thing, but having to do another. This is the situation in which most of our shelter kids find themselves. Having them identify the source of the frustration and problem solve it, can avert the escalation. Empower them. Offer them choices. Can they call a worker and complain, ask questions, or make requests? If they finally realize they can't change their situation, the only thing they can really change is their attitude. Teaching these coping skills is very worthwhile.

Kids may just be testing limits to find out what the boundaries are. The person in charge needs to artfully set consistent limits without bumping heads.

There is a quick self-assessment a counselor or parent can do to ascertain what kind of conflict is occurring. You simply take an inventory of your emotional response to a child's behavior. If you find the child's behavior extremely annoying or irritating- "it's all about attention." It will not work to ignore the attention seeker. The path out of this conflict is counter-intuitive. You will have to attend to the child in increments that work within your schedule and reservoir of patience. Children, especially ADD/ADHD children will not settle for "no attention." They would prefer "negative attention" over "no attention." This is how "cycling" occurs. It's basically a needy, emotional snowball that rolls down hill, getting bigger and bigger.

² (Golletz 2009)

On the other hand, if you find yourself getting angry, “it’s all about power and control.” Again, the path out of the conflict is counter-intuitive. Instead of showing the youth who’s boss, you have to empower him or her. Give them some choices and responsibility to give them some control and help and help gain a sense of control over their lives.

De-escalating the Escalated Behavior

Isolate the incident to reduce contagion. Use non-threatening body language. As they approach and cross that dotted line, their rationality will have somewhat checked out. In a very real way, the child’s emotions become more primitive and base. They truly feel emotionally at survival level. They are reading your body language, but not really processing your words. At this point, they aren’t thinking rationally about your content. So, in some respects, quit talking. Your warnings will only serve to add fuel to the fire.

Keep some internal tension. Try to position yourself with a quick, clear, exit if necessary.

Your primary method of de-escalation is “active listening.” This is like removing the cover from the pot that is ready to boil over. Let the steam escape. Use all the skills you learned in your interpersonal relations class- active listening, empathizing, paraphrasing, etc. Hopefully, as long as they are talking, they’re not swinging. Don’t feel like you need to shut them down. Try to ask questions to get at the heart of the matter. If they are saying inappropriate things, particularly about other people, you can deal with those consequences later. First, you need to focus on connecting and understanding to de-escalate.

At the Shelter, we are not licensed to do “holds” on youth. If a child starts getting more threatening or damages property, we say, “I would really like to see you keep it together. But, if you are going to threaten, assault people or destroy property, you will need to talk to an Officer.” Then, try to walk away to allow this to sink in. Again, try to avoid polarity. If you have to call law enforcement, then call. Sometimes the presence of an Officer will de-escalate the situation. If the child escalates with the Officer present, the Officer can have them charged and placed in a safer setting. We call this a bottom line consequence. Remember, you did everything you could to encourage the child to make good choices. We teach what we allow, so setting this bottom-line consequence is sometimes necessary.



Recovery- This final stage can offer some very therapeutic moments that can provide lessons and chances to rebuild relationships. The child had a lot on their mind that came out kicking and screaming. Some issues are like that. Now, your child is emotionally spent and a bit vulnerable. Many children really open up at this time and are finally ready to disclose some thoughts that have been plaguing them...perhaps for some time. Don't be so upset with them that you miss this opportunity. I have been in many situations where key disclosures were made after an escalation that opened the door to recovery.

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Note: for a little summary of this useful tool, see Bill Blake's YouTube video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdozzYQgD_g starting at the :55 second mark