

Tips to Manage Crisis Behavior

Parents are sometimes unsure how to help a child in crisis. The primary goal is to help that child feel safe and get to a place where they can regulate their thoughts and emotions. A child in a crisis—a time of social, emotional, and physical distress that temporarily impairs their ability to cope—is being controlled by their emotional brain. That’s the “fight, flight, or freeze” state. Quite literally, that child is not able to access the prefrontal cortex—the thinking brain—to help make good choices. Think of it as a time when the child’s brain is “offline;” they can’t use logic or listen to information while offline. In a true crisis situation, the only thing to do is to help the child calm down by remaining calm ourselves.



Following, you will find an overview of the three stages of a crisis and tips for how you can help the child in your care during those stages.

The Three Stages of a Crisis

1. Before. The events in a child or adolescent’s life are causing stress or agitation, but there is no current crisis.

As the caregiver, assess the child’s feelings and try to recognize signals. There may be many signs to indicate that the child is

becoming dysregulated, such as hyperactivity, repetitive motions/actions, pacing, speaking loudly, withdrawing, sweating, or fidgeting.

Example: The child in your care is feeling stressed because they have just learned that their parent was arrested for possession of drugs last night, and their siblings are now living with a relative. They are yelling at you and insisting that they must go immediately to see their parent in jail. You explain that they cannot see their mom because of jail visitation rules. The child is screaming, making threats to run away, pacing, and is near the outside door.

- Be an active listener. *“I hear that you are really angry and frustrated.”*
- Speak calmly, assertively, and respectfully. *“I understand that you feel this is very unfair.”*

2. During. Behavioral changes increase in the child.

This might include:

- Being anxious, upset, or fearful
- Making demands or threats
- Crying
- Yelling

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- Wanting to isolate
- Running away
- Being destructive/throwing things
- Being physically aggressive

When a child begins to escalate, there are several options you might try to de-escalate. These will vary depending on the child and their history, as well as their needs, mental health, trauma, learning disabilities, etc. There is no “one size fits all” answer to handling crises.

Many things can be prevented by editing your environment. For example, you may want to minimize items in the child’s bedroom so they can go there without being surrounded by anything breakable. You might also have a plan for other children to go to a safe place if someone gets aggressive or dangerous. Try to give the child time and space; most of all, be present, calm, and quiet.

3. After the outburst.

The child is probably calm but may appear tired or depressed.

- Give them time to process. Then, you might ask, “Can we talk about what upset you?”
- Help the child recognize their feelings and behavior. If you can, try to connect them for your child. *“What were you feeling when you were yelling? Were you scared?”*
- Develop a plan for new behaviors for the “next time” and practice it with the child. *“What else could you do when you are feeling angry?”*
- Try to get back to your routine and reassure them. *“We will always be here and will keep you safe. Everyone gets angry; we will practice what we do when we are angry and scared and help you get through it.”*

In the future, try to notice when the child uses

those new behaviors and compliment them for doing so.

The best thing to do may be to learn with the child. Together, try to identify what triggers the child’s behavioral outbursts. Possible triggers may be:

- Telling the child what to do
- Being left alone
- Someone calling them names
- Yelling or being exposed to loud noises
- Being touched

Develop a plan with the child for various ways to deal with triggers. Some examples include:

- Giving the child choices
- Providing physical activity
- Responding in a calm voice
- Giving you and the child time to cool off

Finally, help the child recognize activities that will help them to calm down, such as:

- Writing
- Exercising
- Spending quiet time in their rooms
- Wrapping up in a blanket
- Reading
- Talking to others

Learning the situations that may trigger a crisis response for the child in your care will take time. Work closely with all of the child’s care team members so that you can help teach the child how best to respond and recover.



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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Fostering and Supporting Children with Disruptive Behavior*, by Karol Wendt (Study Guide Included With Handouts)
- *Parenting with Love and Logic*, by Foster Cline, M.D.
- *Seeing Red: An Anger Management & Peacemaking Curriculum*, by Jennifer Simmonds
- *Anger Management Games for Children*, by Deborah M. Plummer
- *Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control*, by Heather Forbes
- *No-Drama Discipline - The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*, by Daniel J. Siegel
- *An Introduction to "How Does Your Engine Run?" The Alert Program® for Self-Regulation*, by TherapyWorks, Inc.
- *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, by Bruce Perry & Maia Szalavitz
- Virtual Resource Kit: [Looking at Challenging Behaviors via a Trauma-Informed Lens](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Is it Grief? Why Challenging Behaviors May be Signs of Grieving](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [When Difficult Behaviors Arise](#)
- [Behavior as Communication](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- ["Trauma" Video Playlist](#)