

De-escalation strategies

1. Do not try to reason with them

When your child is having a meltdown, the logical part of their brain (the prefrontal cortex) isn't working.

During a meltdown, the fight-or-flight instinct takes over, the brain is flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, so they literally cannot access the part of their brain that thinks logically.

It may be tempting to try to reason with your child but often that will make them angrier.

Avoid saying things like "I know you wanted me to pick you up from school, but I have to work late." or "Your pink shirt is in the washer so I can't have it ready in time that's why you need to wear a different shirt."

When the brain is engaged in fight-or-flight, there is a perceived threat. During that time, reasoning attempts are ineffective. Often showing empathy will also make things worse.

Focus on reassuring your child that they are safe, by staying calm and meeting basic needs.

Once your child has actually calmed down, they may respond to this kind of reasoning, but mid-meltdown it won't help.

2. Avoid making demands

Sometimes too many demands can actually cause the meltdown in the first place. But regardless of the cause, avoid making more demands during dysregulated situations.

Telling your child repeatedly to "stop" or "calm down" or "snap out of it" isn't going to make them stop or calm down or snap out of it. It doesn't matter how nicely, or assertively, you ask.

Place all of your other expectations on hold, temporarily. The only thing that matters in the present moment is helping your child calm down.

3. Do not yell to be heard over your screaming child

Yelling makes you appear threatening and will not help de-escalate a meltdown.

Once the fight or flight instinct is activated, it's important to understand that your child's brain is perceiving a threat. They need reassurance that they are safe.

You may think "my child knows I'd never hurt them". Of course, they do. But during these situations, your child isn't thinking logically at all. Their brain is instinctually reacting so anything that seems threatening will worsen the situation.

If your child is screaming do not try yelling so they can hear you. Wait until they stop and then speak to them calmly and empathetically.

4. Validate their feelings, but not their actions

Everybody has the right to feel a certain way about any given situation. One thing you never want to do is shame your child for how they're feeling.

Giving validation to their feelings shows your child that you accept their thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

This shows your child that you're on their side. Even if you don't think they have a "reason" to be upset, they obviously are so try to put yourself in their shoes.

Say things like "It makes sense that you are mad right now" Or, "If that happened to me, I would be so upset, too"

Include a "because" when you validate instead of a "but" – this is part of a strategy known as emotion coaching, you can read more on that here.

emotion coaching steps

For example: "It makes sense that you're upset right now because you really wanted the orange cup, not the blue cup – and because it's hard to not get what you want sometimes"

You don't want your child to feel shame for having emotions. We can learn a lot from emotions. It's the actions that need to change.

5. Respect personal space

Everyone's personal "bubble" is different, but regardless that bubble gets bigger with heightened emotions.

Unless your child asks, keep back at least 3 feet from them. Do not try to touch them, hug them, or pick them up (unless they're in danger).

In a heightened emotional state like a meltdown, feeling trapped or closed in by you can farther escalate the situation.

6. Be aware of your body language and facial expressions

It's important to appear calm and non-threatening throughout your child's meltdown. The best way to do this is by being mindful of your body language and facial expressions.

Keep your facial expression neutral. Consciously do a check of yourself and make sure you aren't frowning, furrowing your brow, or clenching your jaw.

Also, be intentional with your body language. Don't cross your arms or put your hands on your hips. Avoid pacing, pointing your finger or other large hand gestures.

It's best to keep your hands in front of your body in a relaxed position.

One of the biggest factors in de-escalation is parental emotional regulation.

7. Get on your child's level

Don't stand over them, looking down at them as you talk. It gives off a vibe of superiority that isn't helpful at the moment. It also can feel threatening.

If your child will sit, sit with them. If not, kneel so you're at eye level with them when communicating. (Although it's usually best to keep communication to a minimum).

You may even need to lay with them if they're on the floor.

8. Distraction

This de-escalation strategy works best if it's used early.

Try distracting your child from the current situation by offering them a favourite toy, a preferred calming activity, or showing them a funny video, you think they would like.

This may look like offering your child a break in a calm down corner to also change up their environment.

This technique doesn't mean your child "gets away with" the behaviour. Once they're calm and more likely to respond with reason and logic you need to address the original issue.

9. Reflect on your child's wants and needs

Reflective listening shows you are listening to their concerns, however poorly they are being communicated.

Say things like "So you are saying you are upset because you really wanted your pink shirt today?" or "You don't want your Aunt to pick you up from school, do I have this right?"

If you're lucky enough to get a moment where your child says "YES!" to your reflection, it opens an opportunity for you to then validate your child's feelings and help them calm down.

10. Acknowledge your child's right for refusal

Children can suddenly become a lot more likely to cooperate when they don't feel like they are being "forced" to do something.

Acknowledge this right by saying "You're right, I can't make you do" then explain why you would like them to choose to do what is asked, and provide a logical consequence.

For example, "You're right, I can't make you clean up your toys. However, we can't play outside until they are put away. The choice is yours."

You're allowed to set boundaries and allow them to choose.

11. Answer their questions but ignore targeted aggression

If your child asks a question during a meltdown, even if it's asked inappropriately or rudely, provide a calm and concise answer.

However, ignore any aggressive statements they make towards you. For example, if your child yells "You're the worst mommy in the world!", do not respond or react.

Keep talking to a minimum, using short responses. Answer their questions and nothing more.

If your child regularly defaults to aggressive communication when they're angry, this is a great communication printable to try (when they're calm – not as a de-escalation technique): [Assertive vs Aggressive Communication](#)

12. Silence

Sometimes total silence can help your child begin calming down and then start seeing things more reasonably.

Stop talking altogether to both your child and anyone else around you. I also try to take slow, deep breaths when I'm trying this strategy. Breathe deeply enough that it's audible in the silence.

It helps me to remain calm and also models a healthy calming strategy for my child – even if they aren't ready to use one.

13. Offer a movement break or a walk

Getting moving is proven to reduce stress, help you calm down, and increase serotonin; the feel-good neurotransmitter.

During a meltdown, the fight or flight instinct is activated – movement like going for a walk can "trick" your brain into feeling that it's chosen "flight" and helps you start calming down.

Ask your child if they want to go for a quick walk or movement break. You can even try this 7-minute HIIT workout for kids or this dinosaur-themed workout.

14. Be non-judgemental

Regardless of the situation at hand, acting judgemental during a meltdown will only make things worse.

Avoid things like using sarcasm, dismissing your child's feelings, blaming them, or treating them as unintelligent.

Also, avoid lecturing or trying to solve their problems for them at the moment. This conversation needs to come later when they're calm again.

15. Decrease stimulation

No matter what caused the meltdown, additional stimulation can contribute to more overload.

Minimize this stimulation by dimming lights, turning the TV down or off, having other people leave the room if possible.

It's a good idea to also have a safe calming space where your child can go to remove themselves from the situation when they're overstimulated.

16. Avoid saying "no"

If your child is asking you questions, avoid saying the word "no" because it can instantly make things worse.

No is a trigger word for a lot of people.

Nobody likes to hear the word "no" and when emotions are already heightened, it can make things even worse for a child.

Of course, I'm not suggesting you say yes to whatever they want. Simply offer more open-ended answers like "we can plan a time to do that" or "that's something we can talk about when everybody is calm."

17. Use calming visual input

Certain visual input can be mesmerising and help children calm down.

Try creating a calm down bottle together to use when your child is upset, using an LED light projector, or a lava lamp.

18. Deep breathing exercises

The truth is, unless these skills are taught to your child when they're calm, they aren't going to work when they're upset.

It takes a lot of practice and pre-teaching for your child to be able to self-regulate with deep breathing exercises. However, the work can pay off.

Eventually, with frequent practice, while calm, you will be able to prompt your child to do deep breathing exercises when they are upset or to model that breathing and have them imitate you.

If you can get your child to use this de-escalation technique in the moment, it works quite quickly.

Read some tips about how to teach kids to do deep breathing correctly: [here](#)

This 5-minute bio-feedback activity (done when everyone is calm) is a great way to show your child how deep breathing helps you calm down; it's called How low can you go?

All of these strategies won't work on all children, and the ones that do work probably won't work every time.

But, having a bank of de-escalation strategies to try is useful for parents who regularly encounter meltdowns.