

De-Escalation

De-escalation is a VERY important concept for ALL parents. De-escalation means, “to decrease the scope or intensity” of something. Stated in different terms, and applied to working with kids, de-escalation means calming things down in a potentially difficult situation.

There are many times when a child (or a situation) seems to get out of control or to “escalate” in a matter of moments. Something we say to a child may result in their becoming frustrated or angry. When parents and kids interact with one another, and one or both of them gets upset, all of a sudden, the situation can become tense – tempers can flare and there is potential for disaster!

It is important that we know how to “de-escalate” these types of situations. As most parents are not given any training in “De-Escalation” (or most other parenting techniques), it is often the case that they unintentionally make things worse...

Let’s look at a few examples...

Say you are coaching a youth basketball team. A particular child has been acting inappropriately on the basketball court. You give him the opportunity to change his attitude and behavior, but he persists in being inappropriate. You then tell him that he needs to sit out of the game until he is able to follow the rules and behave appropriately. The child does walk off the court, but on his way, he mumbles something under his breath to you, which happens to include profanity – directed toward you.

You then have to decide how you are going to respond to this situation. There are several options:

- 1) Let’s say you instantly react to his verbal reproach toward you... You go over to him and get in his face asking, “What did you just say”? He replies, “I didn’t say anything”. You persist: “Yes you did. I heard you. You’re gonna tell me to my face what you said”. Well, you can guess that this approach is NOT going to be effective in calming the kid down. In fact, this type of approach is likely to *escalate* the situation – making matters worse.
- 2) You could simply ignore the child for the time being. The fact that he had behaved inappropriately by cursing could be addressed at a later time. This approach of ignoring the child for the moment would allow him to cool off and would most likely accomplish your goal of de-escalating the situation. He would probably be more willing to admit he had been inappropriate at a later time.
- 3) Yet another option would be to approach the child on the sidelines after he had been taken out of the game. Telling him something like, “Looks like you were pretty frustrated out there” might give him “permission” to talk about how he was feeling out on the basketball court. Continue the conversation using *active listening* skills (listening for how the child feels)! This approach almost always de-escalates potentially harmful situations.

Consider a teacher in a situation in which several kids were involved in some sort of integrity issue... perhaps one child stole some candy from the classroom candy supply and three others knew about it. None of them came forward with the information, but the teacher found out. As a result, none of the kids were awarded the privileges they had earned earlier for that week. One of kids had been very much looking forward to his very first time of earning privileges for good behavior. She was excited to share the news with her parents and now her privileges had been taken away. This girl was much more upset

with the fact that she lost her privileges than the others were. She was angry and hurt and confused about her own actions, yet she was taking her frustration out on others. She was particularly mad at the child who had taken the candy. You notice that during recess time the two kids are beginning to antagonize one another. The girl who is upset about not getting to have her privileges for the first time is getting more and more upset as she begins to rant and rave. The teacher is concerned that she will harm the other child. The teacher can:

- 1) Address the girl saying, “Look – you are not going to blame other people for what went on here. You are just as responsible for what happened here and you alone are the reason you are not getting your privileges. It’s too bad you won’t be able to tell your parents that you earned them but you better think about that before you decide to lie the next time. Furthermore, if you lay one hand on anyone else, you’re really gonna know what sorry is”. Well – this sort of speech may contain some of what the child needs to hear – but not in this manner or at a time like this when she is volatile and ready to explode. This sort of approach would most likely escalate the situation, making it worse than it already is. This speech also includes some sarcasm, which would not be received well by a child who is already irritated.
- 2) The teacher could ask the girl to come talk to her in another part of the room. The teacher might say, “You sound really upset right now”. (Active listening...) Allow the time to respond... she might say something like, “Yeah, I’m mad! It’s that boy’s fault I don’t get to have my privileges and tell my parents I earned them”. You reply, “Yeah – I know it must really hurt that you don’t get to have the privileges and tell your family about earning them”. (You *ignore* the part about the other person being at fault and focus on the girl’s feelings). She might say, “I haven’t ever been able to tell my parents that I earned weekly privileges”... This type of conversation allows the child to focus on *herself* and how she *feels*. It takes the focus off anyone else as well. The important thing is that the girl has an opportunity to talk about what is really bothering her and this gives her a sense of relief. This sort of approach *de-escalates*, or *calms* an intense situation.

There are some things to remember when you are in a situation that is potentially volatile:

- You are the one in charge – your handling of the situation can make all the difference between things getting out of hand or becoming stable
- You need to THINK before you ACT
 - Assess the situation... what is going on... what moods are the parties involved in... what do I know about those people from past experience that works with them to calm them down... what is my role in this situation
 - Get *out of yourself*... this means that no matter what is going on with you at the moment (you may be mad at the person yourself and want to get back at them, you may be upset about something else and be inclined to take your frustration out on the child, etc.) you need to be *professional* and do your job as an adult to the best of your ability
- USE ACTIVE LISTENING – it is almost always the best tool you have!
 - Active listening lets the person know you are focused on them and CARE
 - It targets how the person is *feeling* – and that is most often what they need to talk about