

Applying It: Responding to Unmanageable Stress Behaviors in Young Children

Center for Early Education
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

This tip sheet introduces the steps adult caregivers can take to prevent stress in a child before challenging behaviors occur, and how to respond when a child uses behavior to communicate feelings.

Knowing and doing can be two very different things. We can build skills through harnessing our knowledge and applying evidence-based practices. Some of these practices may challenge existing beliefs and notions we hold about ourselves. They may make us question our current thinking about, and response to, the behaviors young children show us. Most significantly, they may also ask us to change our current practices.

RECALL IT

The **Introducing It** tip sheet presents these ideas:

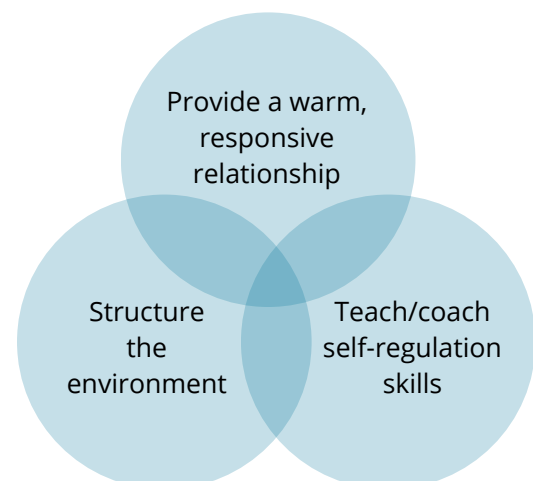
- Children depend upon a safe and trusting relationship with important caregiving adults
- Co-regulation with a caregiver can buffer children being overwhelmed by unmanageable stress
- The younger the child, the less able they are to self-regulate without adult support
- Adults can offer children language and acceptable behaviors to express their feelings
- Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or severe trauma, as well as those with atypical developmental profiles, may need additional time and scaffolding to develop self-regulation skills

To help children build the complex set of skills used in managing stress, they need us to:

- Manage our own responses to their behaviors
- Respond with warm predictability and empathy
- Give them language to name their feelings and offer alternative, acceptable behaviors
- Know and see them for who they are, including recognizing their temperament, preferences, developmental stage, abilities, and default stress responses—commonly known as “fight, flight, or freeze”
- Understand and acknowledge their family’s history, culture, language, and values
- Use our understanding of the brain’s response to stress in helping to shape behavior

HOW TO CO-REGULATE

Each of the points above have skills and practices we can incorporate into our care of young children.



THINK ABOUT IT

As their caregiving adults, we must offer children warm and responsive interactions when they are upset to help them become regulated. Helping them in this way promotes their understanding, expression, and regulation of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is called co-regulation (Murray et al., 2015). Co-regulation teaches children they can trust adults to meet their needs.

“Manage our own responses to the child's behaviors”

- What behaviors do **you** find challenging? Why?
- What does the behavior(s) make you think and feel about the child?
- Where might those beliefs and feelings come from?

We each hold underlying beliefs and values about the behaviors we find challenging. Self-reflection gives us the means to uncover and examine our beliefs and values, as well as to name the emotions we feel in the face of a child's behavior. By reflecting on this before an incident occurs, we become better able to acknowledge our thoughts and feelings in the moment, and to respond appropriately to a child.

“Respond with warmth, predictability, and empathy”

“Give them language to name their feelings and offer alternative, acceptable behaviors”

Recall a situation in which you had to respond to a child whose behavior was challenging to you.

- To what degree did the child's behavior impact your ability to be warm and empathetic? Why?
- What did you say or do to acknowledge the child's feelings?
- How did you help them replace their behavior with a more acceptable response?
- Consider your answers to the three previous questions. How consistent is this type of response?

Our response to a child must first acknowledge their emotional overwhelm—and then move to helping them learn more acceptable behaviors. Our reliability, kindness, and guidance—demonstrated repeatedly—helps the child's body and mind learn what it feels like to be regulated (Gearity, 2009).

“Know and see them for who they are” “Understand and acknowledge their family's history, culture, language, and values”

- How aligned are your expectations for a child's capacity to self-regulate with their developmental stage and abilities?
- How do you consider temperament as you think about strategies to use with individual children?
- How do you make the physical environment accessible, predictable, and developmentally appropriate? To what degree does it reflect the child's cultures and values?

Addressing behavior requires we embrace the whole child. Our approaches, responses, and the environment we create for children require flexibility. By proactively seeking to join children and understand who they are, we model skills and build trust.

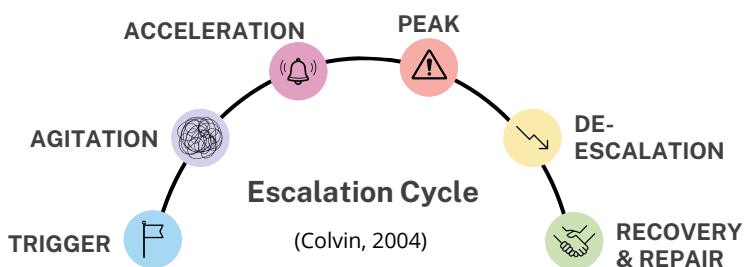
“Use our understanding of the brain's response to stress in helping to shape behavior”

- How frequently does your stress reaction to behavior set the tone when addressing the child?
- To what degree do you help children become fully regulated again before attempting to ask questions, make suggestions, or teach?

Unmanageable levels of stress send the brain's stress response system into overdrive. We are unable to access the learning and thinking region of the brain in this state. Children need to be fully regulated in order to talk about and learn from experiences. Unless we first address their feelings and help them become calm, moments of stress become lost opportunities for learning and regulatory skill-building.

TRY IT: THE ESCALATION CYCLE

The **escalation cycle** describes the different stages a child goes through when responding to a strong emotion. In the case of stress responses, caregiving adults can use the stages to better understand the message behind the behavior and guide their response (Colvin, 2004). Escalation—and its intensity—is better managed if adults can plan in advance how to support a child experiencing unmanageable stress. Planning incorporates knowing the child and considering their developmental level and personal history.



TRIGGER: an event or environmental factor alerting the child that some aspect of perceived safety is threatened. Triggers are individual to the child and typically connected to an unmet need, an unaddressed concern, or an unsolved problem.

Strategies to support the child in this phase:

- Validate the child's needs/feelings
"You want a turn with the blocks, and now you are worried you will have to wait."
- Try problem-solving with the child, emphasizing relationship and connection
"How about we do Legos together while we wait?"
- Ask yourself if flexibility is an option
"We usually have 2 children at the water table at a time, but I wonder if we could try 3 children if we all agree on a few things together, like where we each will stand?"

How can you use your knowledge of a child to help to identify triggers?

What planning can you do now to intercept escalation if a trigger occurs?

How might you involve the child in this planning? What skills can you teach them?

AGITATION: child shows increased unfocused behavior in response to stress. This may look like being off-task, frequent start/stop of task, physical unrest/movement, yelling, or social withdrawal.

Strategies to support the child in this phase:

- Use relationship and connection
"I see you are feeling angry" or
"We can fix this together!"
- Keep in close physical proximity
- Provide space physically, with a take-a-break or cozy corner. Provide emotional space to let the child's feelings catch up to supports offered
- Provide time and choice: give the child acceptable alternatives
- Give the child movement activities: walking, jumping jacks, wall pushes, large motor room, etc.
- Revisit calm-down activities with the child
"It's hard to _____. What will help you?"
- Supply the child with relaxation activities, such as listening to music, looking at books, playing at water/sensory table, drawing, cuddling with soft blanket/toy, wrapping in weighted blanket, breathing with [Hoberman sphere](#), etc.

How do you let children know you see their struggle? What are some ways you communicate empathy to the child?

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ACCELERATION: child displays focused challenging behavior. The behavior may be withdrawn (internalizing) or disruptive/destructive (externalizing). Behaviors may be provocative, threatening, high-intensity, or shut down/impassive.

Strategies to support the child in this phase:

- Avoid escalating prompts, such as yelling, demands, power struggles
- Maintain calm and respect; emphasize relationship and connection
- Regard the child with kindness and empathy; show it in voice and manners
- Approach child in non-threatening way
- Quickly assess child's language capacity for understanding words in this stage
- Use limit-setting appropriate to the child

**Children need your calm to restore their calm.
How do you check yourself when you see a
child accelerating behaviorally?
What techniques help you to remain
regulated and attentive?**

PEAK: the child is experiencing fight, flight, or freeze. They are no longer in control of physical or verbal actions and display the most problematic behavior. This may include physical aggression, property destruction, self-harm, escape, social withdrawal, or hyperventilation.

Strategies to support the child in this phase:

the same as in Acceleration, except focus is on crisis intervention

- Focus on the safety of the child and others
- Follow crisis intervention and safety-net procedures outlined in your program's policies

What behaviors/situations qualify for using your program's safety net procedures, and which do not?

- Remember that safety-net procedures keep children safe but do not change behavior or teach new skills

DE-ESCALATION: the child's severe behavior decreases, and the child may display confusion. The child may seem to not be listening or may appear numb. The nervous system is recovering in an attempt to regulate and conserve energy. Behaviors may include social withdrawal, denial, blaming others, or minimizing the problem.

Strategies to support the child in this phase: *focus on the child rather than on the behavior*

- Give the child space and support; limit demands on the child
- Stay in the relationship and avoid blaming
- Consider function of behavior; emphasize opportunity to try again and start fresh
- Avoid re-triggering the child by allowing full recovery; child is not yet ready to apologize

How can you support children's dignity during the de-escalation phase?

RECOVERY & REPAIR: the child may attempt to reconnect with adults or other children during **recovery**. Others may be slower to connect until fully ready, while others remain disengaged to self-protect. After full recovery is complete, **repair**, or learning, can occur. The child's brain is now able to transition to a receptive learning state.

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Strategies to support the child in this phase:
remain as calm and gentle as possible

- Focus on reaffirming the relationship between you and the child
“Wow, that was really hard! I'm glad you feel better now. What should we read together now that we are both calm again?”
- Avoid making immediate demands. Child needs time to re-establish and remain in calm state
- Focus on re-establishing routines
“When you are ready, please join us for snack time.”
- Affirm the child's current appropriate behaviors
“I notice how well you're taking turns now.”

Find a private space for the following **repair** strategies:

- Discuss what happened and ask the child how they could handle the situation differently
- Ask the child to apologize if others were impacted by their behavior. Help the child use appropriate words and model how to apologize:
“You worked really hard on your block tower. I'm sorry I knocked it down when I got angry. Can I help you build a new tower?”
- Ask the child to suggest calm-down activities; write the ideas down together

Remember that children learn with stories.
What stories might you offer to a child during the repair stage?

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5 WAYS TO BE

The next time you are with a child who is experiencing high stress levels, try the following.

Be calm: regulate yourself by taking a breath; consciously name the emotions you are feeling

Be quiet: give the child time to calm

Be with: keep the child company; use your calm, your physical presence and your co-regulation strategies to help the child calm

Be aware: verbally acknowledge how and why the child is feeling overwhelmed and name their emotion

Be positive: offer the child a chance to learn from their response. Give them an alternate way to express and show how they are feeling with positive framing

DIVING INTO IT

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