



## Tips to Manage Crisis Behavior

Parents are sometimes unsure of how to help a child who is 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 situation—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. The only thing to do in a true crisis situation, 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 what the child is feeling 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:* Your foster daughter is feeling stressed because she has just learned that her parent was arrested for possession of drugs last night, and her siblings are now living with a relative. She is yelling at you and insisting that she must go immediately to see her parent in jail. You explain that she cannot

see her 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



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- Crying
- Yelling
- 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.

A lot of things can be prevented by editing your environment. For example, you may want to minimize items in the child’s bedroom, so that they can go there and not be surrounded by anything that is 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 his 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 him.  
“*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 we will 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 and their team (case manager, biological family, social worker, foster parent, respite family, therapist, psychologist, teacher). 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 him or her names
- Yelling or being

exposed to loud noises

- Being touched

Develop a plan with the child and the support team for various ways for the child 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

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

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



### Resources from the Coalition's Lending Library

- *Fostering and Supporting Children with Disruptive Behavior* (DVD) by Karol Wendt (Study guide included with handouts)
- *Behavior Management using Self Control* (DVD) by Vera Fahlberg
- *Parenting with Love and Logic*
- *Seeing Red: An Anger Management & Peacemaking Curriculum*, by Jennifer Simmonds
- *Anger Management Games for Children*, by Deborah M. Plummer
- *Behaviors with a Purpose*, by Richard Delaney, PhD, and Charley Joyce, LICSW



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