

De-Escalating Children

in church

WHAT IS DE-ESCALATION?

Children who have experienced trauma often have over-active nervous systems. Their brains tell their bodies they are in danger, even if no physical harm is present. When their fear/stress response is triggered, it can result in what we have historically called “meltdowns” or “tantrums.” However, a child who has experienced trauma is likely not “acting out,” but responding to involuntary messages inside their brains. We must treat these instances differently than a typical outburst to teach the child that they are safe.

THEO

Theo is four years old. He has been in foster care for two years. He is now happy and thriving in his foster home, but he still experiences the impact of the trauma of his early life. He was often left alone for long periods, with no idea if or when his needs would be met. He also witnessed some extremely scary fights between his biological parents. His brain and body still remember these traumatic events, and they come to the surface when he is scared, sad, or angry.

CARA

Cara is nine years old. She has been in and out of foster care most of her life. She is finally in a stable adoptive home, but she still struggles to feel safe and secure in her family. She has been moved around from home to home and was often verbally and emotionally abused. She seems like a friendly, outgoing child, but she hides deep insecurities about her value and worth.

SAM

Sam is fourteen years old. He has only been in foster care for a few months since his mother was arrested. He is struggling to fit in with his foster family and his new church community. He is angry about being taken from his home and worries about his mother and siblings, who are in separate foster homes. The youth group services are loud and dark, and he doesn't know anyone there.



DE-ESCALATING CHILDREN: NOTICE

When a child's nervous system is escalated, they may show early signs of escalated behavior through their body language. They may fidget, clench their fists, withdraw from activities, or raise their voice. The sooner we can notice a triggered nervous system, the sooner we can help them regulate it. Further escalated behaviors are often angry and violent. It's important to move the child to a place where they and the children around them are safe.

THEO

In Sunday School class, Theo seems like an average child. He plays with the other children, laughing and enjoying his friends. One day, all the children are playing in the classroom. It is noisy and exciting. The teacher notices that Theo is playing with a toy truck by repeatedly slamming it into the wall. His face is serious, and he seems stiff and rigid. She notices that Theo isn't playing with any other children, which is unusual for him.

The teacher becomes distracted with another child who needs a glass of water. While she is retrieving a cup, she hears Theo screaming from the other side of the classroom. He has thrown his toy truck and hit another child. He is now crying and thrashing violently.

CARA

Cara loves her Sunday School class. She is talkative and outgoing, but often interrupts the teacher and distracts her classmates. One day, the teacher is telling the children about the story of Moses being sent down the river in a basket to protect him from Pharaoh. Cara is suddenly very quiet and still, and the teacher notices that she is tearing a piece of paper in her lap.

As the teacher continues, Cara begins humming to herself. The teacher stops the lesson and says, "Cara, please stop humming. It's time for listening." Cara becomes visibly distraught. Her face turns red and she begins crying and screaming.

SAM

On Wednesday nights, Sam attends the youth group at his church. He comes in late after arguing with his foster parents. He sits in the back, alone. The adult volunteers try to engage him, but he refuses to talk to them. He doesn't make eye contact with anyone. During game time, an adult volunteer encourages Sam to join in. The students are looking at him, and he starts to fidget in his seat. The adults continue to encourage Sam to play.

Sam stands from his chair and starts walking quickly to the exit of the building. A volunteer blocks Sam's path and puts his hands out to keep Sam from leaving. Sam erupts in an angry curse and pushes the volunteer.



The Three R's

STEP ONE: REGULATE

Get down on their level. Avoid intimidating eye contact. Instead, use “soft eyes” and a soothing tone. In an escalated state, a child cannot process your words. But they can still hear your tone. Start taking deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. This is called co-regulation, or “sharing your calm.” If you can maintain a calm, collected mind and body, the child can use your cues to calm themselves. Continue taking deep breaths and sitting quietly near the child. Fidget toys or little puzzle games can help a child’s brain move from their stress response back into their logical brain. Avoid giving instructions or asking questions in this stage. Rather, work on keeping your own mind and body calm and sharing that calm with the child. This stage may take several minutes, or even longer. Be patient.

THEO

The teacher signals her co-teacher to lead the rest of the class outside. When everyone is gone, she sits next to Theo, who is banging his fists into the floor. The teacher begins breathing deeply, not saying anything. She continues breathing deeply, loud enough for Theo to hear. She sits quietly next to him. In a soft tone, she names some items around the classroom, breathing deeply between each statement. “That is a blue table...This floor is very hard...Your shirt is red...It’s very soft.” This subtle game helps Theo’s brain flip from its escalated state back into its logical state. After a while, Theo begins to copy the teacher’s breathing and his body begins to relax.

CARA

The children’s minister hears Cara crying and comes to the classroom. She hovers her hand over Cara’s back and gently leads her from the room into a small, quiet prayer room, leaving the door open. She sits on the floor and motions for Cara to join her. Cara is screaming too loudly to hear what the Children’s Minister is saying, so the Children’s Minister simply sits still, breathing deeply. She pulls a small puzzle game from her pocket and begins playing with it on the floor. It takes Cara a long time to notice, but when she does, the screaming quiets and she starts to watch the game.

SAM

A volunteer notices Sam’s behavior and leads him outside. Sam is fuming and pacing, visibly angry. The volunteer stays still and quiet, standing a few feet from Sam. Sam begins walking around the parking lot, so the volunteer follows beside him, giving him plenty of space. The volunteer keeps a slow, steady pace as they walk laps around the building. Sam’s pace eventually slows and the volunteer can tell he has calmed a bit. The volunteer motions for them to sit in the grass next to the building, but waits until Sam is ready.



The Three R's

STEP TWO: RELATE

Children who have experienced trauma need to know that the adults caring for them will continue to love and protect them. After the child's nervous system has calmed, you can begin to re-establish your connection to the child through appropriate physical touch (a pat on the back, holding hands, etc.) and through affirming words. "I know that was really difficult." "I'm proud of you for taking deep breaths." "You are safe here with me."

THEO

When Theo is calm, the teacher puts her hand gently on his back. "This classroom can get very noisy," she says, "I bet that can be scary sometimes." Theo wipes his tears and gives a tiny nod. The teacher tells him she is proud of the way he calmed his body. She asks him to pretend to be a noodle, and they both laugh while flopping their arms.

CARA

When Cara is finally calm, the Children's Minister takes her hand gently. They sit facing each other. "Did you know that your Sunday School teacher loves you so much? She loves you so much that she wants to teach you all about the Bible. Some stories can be scary and sad, right? Do you know any funny stories?" She listens as Cara tells her a story about her family's cat.

SAM

Sam finally seems ready to sit in the grass. The volunteer sits beside him, not making eye contact. They sit in silence for a long time. Finally, the volunteer says, "Sam, I'm really glad you are brave enough to come to a new place with people you don't know. I know it can be hard, but you're doing a really good job. It always makes me smile when I see you show up each week."

The Three R's

STEP THREE: REASON

When the child feels safe and calm again, you can begin to address any dangerous or unacceptable behaviors the child exhibited before becoming dysregulated. Remember, punishment is not helpful for children who have experienced trauma. It often reinforces the lessons they have learned about adults being dangerous and unpredictable and can compound their feelings of loss and shame. Instead, try giving a “do-over” in a playful way and talk about how they can avoid becoming dysregulated next time. It’s also important to remember that a child who has experienced trauma is not “acting out” on purpose. Try asking yourself, “How might this child’s traumatic experiences have informed these behaviors?” Approach this step with compassion and empathy.

THEO

The teacher knows that Theo has experienced some extremely traumatizing things. The noise and activity in the classroom were too much for him, and his brain told him that he wasn’t safe. They play a game to help Theo practice coming to the teacher when the classroom is too loud so that she can help him regulate before he hurts someone. She helps him apologize to the child he hurt. Theo returns to playing with his toy truck.

CARA

The Children’s Minister knows that Cara struggles to feel loved and valued. The story about Moses reminded her of being passed around from home to home as a small child. When the teacher corrected her, she was reminded of all the times her caregivers used their words to make her feel small and unimportant. The Children’s Minister helps Cara make up a code word she can use when the stories in Sunday School make her feel sad or scared. When she uses this word, the teacher will call the Children’s Minister in to take Cara to do some important tasks with her. Cara is excited to be an important helper.

SAM

The volunteer knows that Sam is angry about being taken from his home. He knows that Sam needs connection more than anything else. They talk about how Sam can come get the volunteer if he needs to take a break outside. They work out a hand signal Sam can use to let the volunteer know when he feels overwhelmed. The volunteer goes with Sam to apologize for pushing the other volunteer. They talk together about ways to avoid that situation in the future. The volunteer goes with Sam to play ping pong inside. Eventually, there is a group of boys cheering for Sam and lining up to play next.



De-Escalation

The Three R's



Regulate

Relate



Reason