



First Steps in De-escalating Challenging or Aggressive Behaviours

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Before we start, please take a moment to remember the trauma your child has endured in their early life – whether this was in utero, as a result of maternal illness, post-birth trauma or as a result of Domestic Violence, Abuse, neglect or any of the other reasons that children can have a challenging start in life.

Your child had to learn to survive. They were powerless. They had to use all the tools at their disposal – but these were so limited – they could cry, scream and move their arms and legs, but with no ability to speak, move with intention or even know what their needs were they were uniquely vulnerable. Now when they have a survival trigger, they have new skills. They can lash out both verbally and physically. They are super strong because their bodies have adrenalin fuelling a fight/flight response. Finally, they feel powerful – they are not vulnerable and helpless anymore. They can prove to the adult that they are strong. Alongside this, it is important to remember that the triggers for their fight/flight response when it comes to adults and basic needs being met is stored in implicit memory – so it is an emotional and sensory memory, and as such not readily accessible to reason (such as CBT therapy). To help them recover, we have to re-train their brains. That is the hard bit, requiring time, patience and the ability to be an endless broken record to develop new connections and ideas.

My top tips to keep behaviours from escalating

- ALWAYS start with empathy for the way the child is feeling - if you can't take a guess, just say “Wow - sometimes it is so hard to be a kid. Do you need a hug?” We need to recreate the attunement/attachment cycle for them so regulation (empathy) comes first, then naming or meeting the need. The hard part of this is stepping out of your own experience and finding a way to connect with the perspective of the child in that moment.
- Secondly- Our brains are built from experience - your child is acting out of their expectations based on previous experience, so this is why we call this "hard wired". The architecture of the brain is formed through our early experiences, it's hard to shift. So the next top tip is to maintain Consistency Predictability and Reliability (CPR for the brain). By being a broken record, and keeping messages simple, and following routines to the letter (and minute) we help our children to create new connections that will, if we keep them growing stronger, be able to over-ride the old ideas. because the children are over 2 this takes time. The older they are, the longer it can take.

- Thirdly have a visual timetable and stick to it. this helps you as well as the child or children. Keep to mealtimes. Keep to bedtimes. Maintain the same place for each child in the car or at the table. These simple strategies remain a child again and again that there is a place for them not only in the home but in the family.
- If you have siblings, they will fight for your attention and their brain tells them this is a survival need. Have a narrative – “there is enough of me to go around. I can look after both/all of you and keep you safe”.
- Lastly do not let things get to boiling point before you employ distraction tactics such as changing the environment - walk to the park, let off steam in a safe way, go to shop, walk in the woods or have another movement break.

Finally - practice self-care to keep your own brain connected so you do not go to low brain responses, but forgive yourself for slipping up!

Related information/handouts from NAO TP

1. Managing Violent behaviour Course Day one option
2. CPR for the Brain
3. The Internal Working Model
4. The Trauma Room
5. Blank Visual timetable