50+ De-escalation Strategies

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Being able to de-escalate and defuse situations with kids and young adults is an extremely helpful skill. Kids and young adults who become emotionally overwhelmed or irritated in a situation may begin to express their emotions in aggressive or violent ways. Some examples of these behaviors might include aggressive posturing, yelling, throwing items, swearing, and making threats. Quite often, without training, these situations become a power struggle between the young adult and the teacher. These power struggles only make the situation worse, though.

The best way to handle these types of behaviors is to de-escalate the situation as soon as possible. It’s very important to recognize that this does not mean letting the student get away with the behavior. Instead, de-escalation focuses on helping the student return their emotions back to a normal level. It is critical that the student is calm for a period of time before behavior and expectations are discussed again.

Kids and young adults with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and trauma are just some examples of those who need these strategies utilized to be successful.

If you need further training and support in this area, consider the De-Escalation Strategies Guide that includes extensive training materials, information on Oppositional Defiant Disorder, proactive strategies, reference lists, and a quick-guide to store in a spot for use on the fly. Also, remember to download the free printable list of over 50 de-escalation strategies. They are ideal to keep on a board by your desk, in the team room, or in a binder to bring to student support meetings. Let me add that they are not only for teachers. Parents, counselors, and administrators could use them, too!

Here are over 50 strategies and phrases you can use when de-escalating a situation:

1. Act calm even if you’re not.
2. Say, “Let’s talk about this later”.
3. Use humor to lighten to mood.
4. Lower your voice.
5. Give a choice.
6. Walk away.
7. Ask, “What would help you right now?”
8. Change the subject to a positive one.
9. Give personal space.
10. Say, “I see where you are coming from.”
11. Distract with a positive photo of something they like.
12. Show that you are listening.
13. Remove the audience.
15. Talk about something they like.
17. Encourage the person.
18. Remind them of something amazing they did.
19. Say, “You can do this.”
20. Call another adult for help.
21. Say, “Let’s call… I think they can help.”
22. Be willing to find a solution.
23. Offer to change the way you are doing something.
24. Re-state what the person is saying.
25. Validate their thoughts.
26. Avoid over-reacting.
27. Use active listening.
28. Offer a solution.
29. Let the person talk without interrupting.
30. Say, “I see your point.”
31. Offer to take a walk with the person.
32. Clarify expectations.
33. Remind them of something they love.
34. Apologize for something you did wrong or the way it was taken.
35. Invite them to do a preferred activity.
36. Ask if they can explain more about how they’re feeling.
37. Try to understand the person’s perspective.
38. Slow yourself down to avoid getting worked up.
39. Say, “So, you’re upset because… right?”
40. Don’t say “calm down”.
41. Show empathy.
42. Encourage the person to use a coping strategy.
43. Don’t take items or personal property away from them.
44. Encourage the person to take a walk or get a drink.
45. Give the person an “out” (i.e. letting them go to another room or walking away).
46. Ask, “Would it help if… ?”
47. Keep escape routes open to the door.
48. Coach the person with positive remarks.
49. Acknowledge where you agree with the person.
50. Remind the person, “You’re not in trouble”.
51. Tell the person, “I’m here for you.”
52. Say, “Talk to me,” and listen.
53. Tell the person to take a minute to themselves.
54. Ignore the behavior if it’s minor.
55. Distract by saying, “Hey, let’s go…”
56. Be respectful in your tone.
57. “Do what works” in the moment.
58. Spend time debriefing after the incident to identify ways to improve.
59. Ask them to draw a picture of what happened.
60. Avoid needing to get the last word.
61. Just give wait time.

If you love this topic, read my post on 13 ways to avoid power struggles with kids and young adults!