Children's Home Society of North Carolina

De-Escalation Techniques: Helping Children in Distress

PURPOSE:

To equip North Carolina foster parents with simple, trauma-informed strategies to calm children during moments of distress. These tools help maintain safety, preserve trust, and support healing.

Why it Matters

- Children in care may carry trauma that affects how they respond to stress.
- Escalated situations can overwhelm both child and caregiver if not handled carefully.
- Using calm, consistent strategies builds trust and security.
- De-escalation protects relationships and prevents placement disruptions.

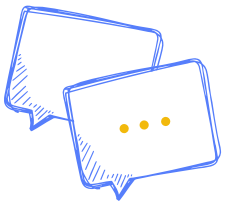
Core Principles

- **Stay Calm:** Your reaction sets the tone. Take a deep breath before responding.
- **Validate Feelings:** Show empathy with words like, "I see you're upset. I'm here to help."
- **Use Non-Threatening Body Language:** Keep arms at your side, soften your facial expression, and lower yourself to the child's level without looming over them.
- **Give Space:** Step back a few feet, allowing the child to cool down. Time can range from a few minutes to longer; check in when emotions have softened.
- **Redirect Positively:** Offer healthy, calming choices like drawing, listening to music, or going for a walk.

Actionable Strategies

Phrases That Validate:

- "It's okay to feel angry."
- "I understand this is hard."
- "I'm here when you're ready."



Redirection Ideas:

- Drawing or coloring
- Listening to music with headphones
- Reading quietly
- Taking a short walk outside
- Playing with a stress ball or fidget toy
- Deep breathing together
- Quiet time in a safe, comfortable space

What NOT To Do

- ✗ Don't cross your arms, clench fists, or frown; this can feel threatening.
- ✗ Don't crowd the child — respect their physical space.
- ✗ Don't touch or hug without asking; some children feel unsafe with physical contact.
- ✗ Don't force talking before the child is ready.
- ✗ Don't dismiss feelings with phrases like "Calm down" or "You're fine."

Extra Tools

For foster parents licensed with Children's Home Society, log in to your Sky Prep account for additional training about this topic.

For more foster parent resources, visit:

chsnc.org