



# De-escalation Strategies for Managing Behavior Melt-downs





- 1 Understanding Behavior
- 2 Understanding Behavior Escalations
- 3 Understanding Emotional Regulation
- 4 Escalated Behavior
- 5 Supportive Strategies

# The Escalation

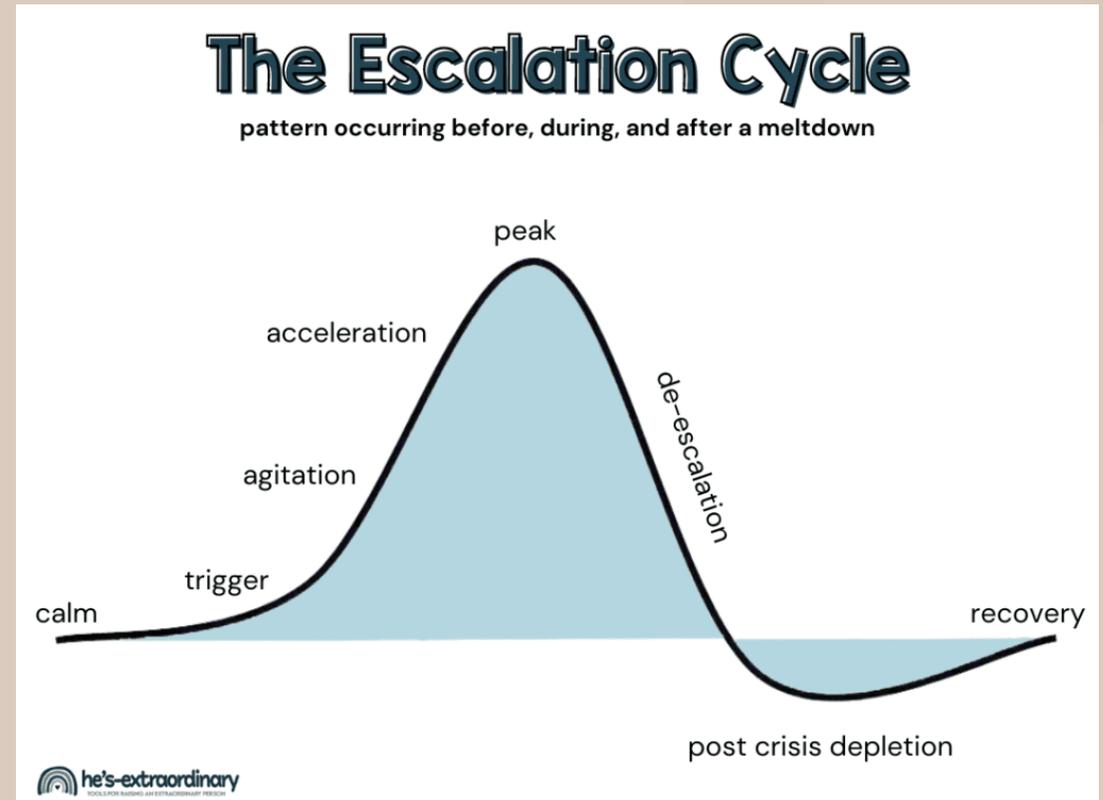
- Sometimes, when children become extremely overwhelmed or they're experiencing sensory overload, they have a meltdown where **they become so dysregulated that their bodies react automatically.**
- This is an automatic nervous system response and not something our kids can consciously control.



- These situations are stressful and overwhelming for *everyone* involved and could potentially lead to safety risks for both your child and bystanders.

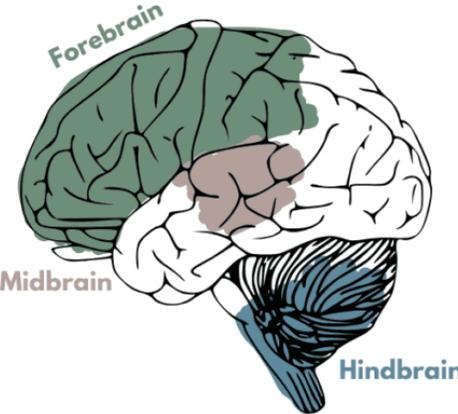
# The Escalation Cycle

Although meltdowns may seem unpredictable or like they happen out of nowhere, there is a clear pattern that happens before, after, and during a meltdown.



# Emotional Regulation & the Brain

**Emotional Regulation & The Brain**



The diagram shows a lateral view of the human brain. The Forebrain is the largest, most anterior part, colored green. The Midbrain is the middle part, colored brown. The Hindbrain is the posterior part, colored blue. Labels 'Forebrain', 'Midbrain', and 'Hindbrain' are placed near their respective regions.

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## Forebrain

**The prefrontal cortex** - The **thinking** part of the brain. Controls executive functions, reasoning, problem-solving, etc. When well regulated, your child's forebrain is engaged and ready to learn.

## Midbrain

**The limbic system** - The **feeling** part of the brain, where emotions are experienced. When engaged, your child has less access to their forebrain. They may act emotional, needy, demanding, uncooperative, nervous, etc. They need help regulating their emotions.

## Hindbrain

**Brain stem and amygdala** - The **survival** part of the brain. Controls fight or flight. Once engaged, the forebrain shuts down. Your child may hit, bite, scream, spit, kick, hide, run away, or shut down. They need to feel safe. You cannot teach or discipline right now.

The diagram is an explanation of how various sections of the brain are used and how that affects emotional regulation.

# Emotional Regulation & the Brain

## Sympathetic Nervous System

A network of nerves that function as your **body's built-in alarm system**. This system's activity increases when you feel stressed, in danger (real or perceived), and physically active. This is the system that controls your **fight-or-flight instinct**.

### Activation

When faced with stress or danger (real or perceived), a region in the brain called the hypothalamus activates the sympathetic nervous system.



### Physical Response

- **Heart rate increases**, pumping blood to muscles and vital organs.
- **Breathing accelerates**, enhancing oxygen intake.
- **Pupils dilate** for better vision
- **Muscles tense up**, priming for action.

### Brain Response

As the sympathetic nervous system floods the body with stress hormones like adrenaline and noradrenaline, the **prefrontal cortex** partially shuts down.



The prefrontal cortex controls **planning, decision-making, problem-solving, controlling impulses, logic, reasoning, and communication skills**.

### Recovery

20-60 minutes after the threat has passed, the body begins recovering

### Impact

- Children are unable to respond to logic, reasoning, or threat of consequences.
- Challenging to find the words to describe their thoughts, feelings, and what triggered them. May become non verbal.

### Fight or Flight Behaviors in Kids

**Fight:** Aggression, destruction, defiance



**Flight:** Avoidance, withdrawal, rushing



### Advice for Parents

- Provide support and safety
- Co-regulation strategies
- NVCI & De-escalation
- Adjust expectations

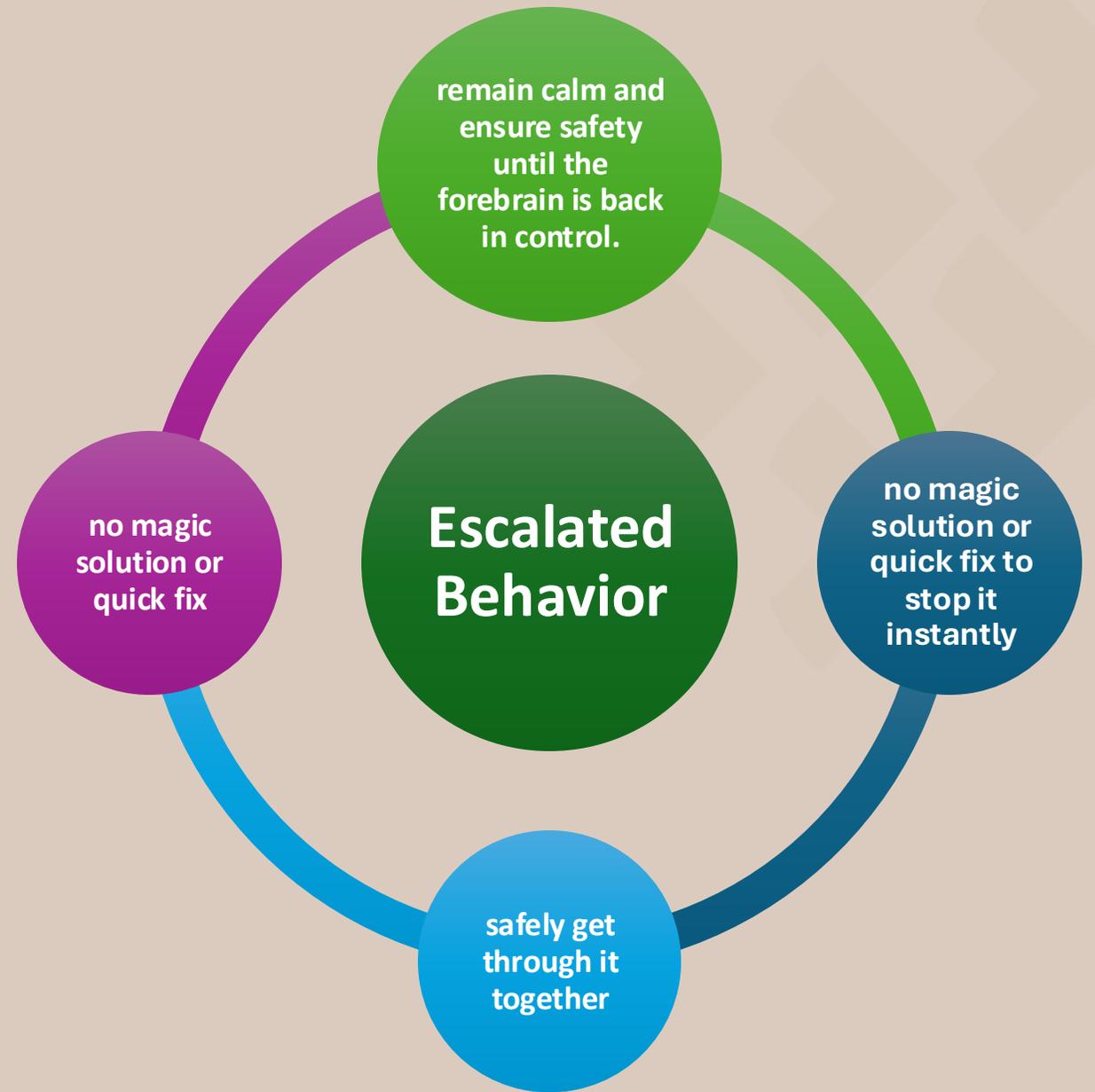
# The Point of No Return

Challenging behaviors happen. How we handle those challenging behaviors can make all the difference.

De-escalation doesn't prevent all challenging behaviors from happening, but these techniques can help defuse a situation before it gets worse.

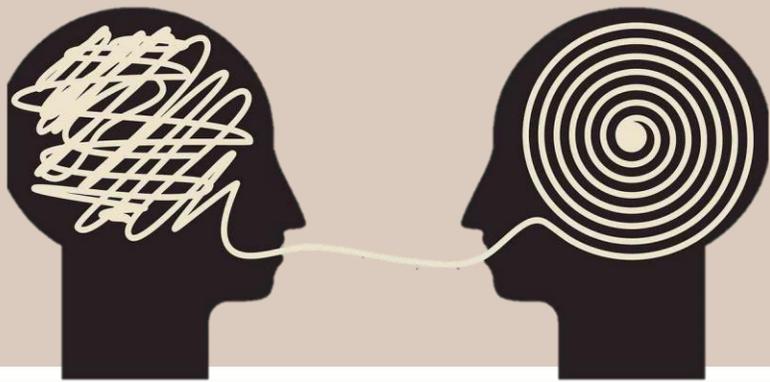


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# Avoid Reasoning and Logic

Avoid saying things like, *“I know you wanted me to pick you up from school, but I have to work late.”* or *“Your pink shirt is in the washer, so I can’t have it ready in time; that’s why you need to wear a different shirt.”*



Once your child has calmed down, they may respond to this kind of reasoning, but mid-meltdown, it won’t help.

# Avoid Making Demands

## ***Don't Yell To Be Heard Over A Screaming Child***



Demands include telling your child repeatedly to “*stop*,” “*calm down*,” or “*snap out of it*” isn’t going to make them stop or calm down or snap out of it. It doesn’t matter how nicely or assertively you ask.

# Validate Their Feelings, Not Their Actions

## Validate Feelings



- 1) Allow children to have their feelings so they can learn they are capable of dealing with them.
- 2) Don't fix, rescue, or try to talk children out of their feelings.
- 3) Validate their feelings: "I can see you are really (angry, upset, sad)."
- 4) Give your child space and time to work through their emotions.

Quotes from the Positive Discipline books © Jane Nelsen

*"It makes sense that you are mad right now," Or, "If that happened to me, I would be so upset, too."*

*"It makes sense that you're upset right now because you really wanted the orange cup, not the blue cup – and because it's hard not to get what you want sometimes."*

# Emotion Coaching

## Attend to the emotion

Acknowledge something's wrong

01

### SAY

"Whoa! I can tell something's up right now"

## Name the emotion

Put the emotion your child's experiencing into words

02

### SAY

"You look really mad " or "you seem disappointed"

## Validate the emotion

Remember - all emotions are valid, even if the behavior accompanying them is inappropriate.

03

### SAY

"It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason 1], and [reason 2], and [reason 3]"

## Meet the Need of the Emotion

Help your child get through the emotion until it passes

04

**SADNESS** needs comfort  
**FEAR** needs safety & security  
**ANGER** needs patience & boundaries

Emotion Coaching helps kids learn that feelings are normal, and they need to be experienced, not suppressed or avoided. It also helps them develop tolerance to sitting with uncomfortable emotions.



# Respect Personal Space



**Everyone's personal "bubble" is different, but regardless, that bubble gets bigger with heightened emotions.**

# Be Mindful of Body Language and Facial Expression



Crossed arms: defensive, self-protective, or closed off

Hands on the hips: ready and in control, or a sign of aggressiveness

## **Be intentional with your body**

**language:** Don't cross your arms or put your hands on your hips. Avoid pacing, pointing your finger, or other large hand gestures. It's best to keep your hands in front of your body in a relaxed position.

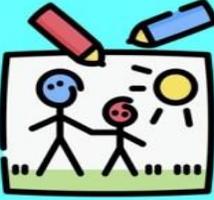
## **Keep your facial expression neutral:**

Consciously check yourself and make sure you aren't frowning, furrowing your brow, or clenching your jaw.

# Distraction

This technique doesn't mean your child "gets away with" the behavior. Once they're calm and more likely to respond with reason and logic, you can re-address the original issue, if appropriate.

The 7 Most Important De-escalation Strategies for Challenging Behaviors

Act calm 	Give a choice 	Listen and repeat what was said 
Change the subject to a positive one 	Invite them to join a calming activity 	Give space and wait time 

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This de-escalation strategy works best if it's used early.

# Reflective Listening

*So, you are saying you are upset because you really wanted your pink shirt today?” or “ You don’t want your Aunt to pick you up from school. Do I have this right?”*

## Reflective Listening

Reflective listening helps your child see that you are hearing, understanding, and caring about their concerns and experiences.



### 1. Paraphrase

SO YOU ARE SAYING...

IT SOUNDS LIKE...

### 2. Clarify

IS THAT RIGHT?

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE?

### 3. Validate & Empathize

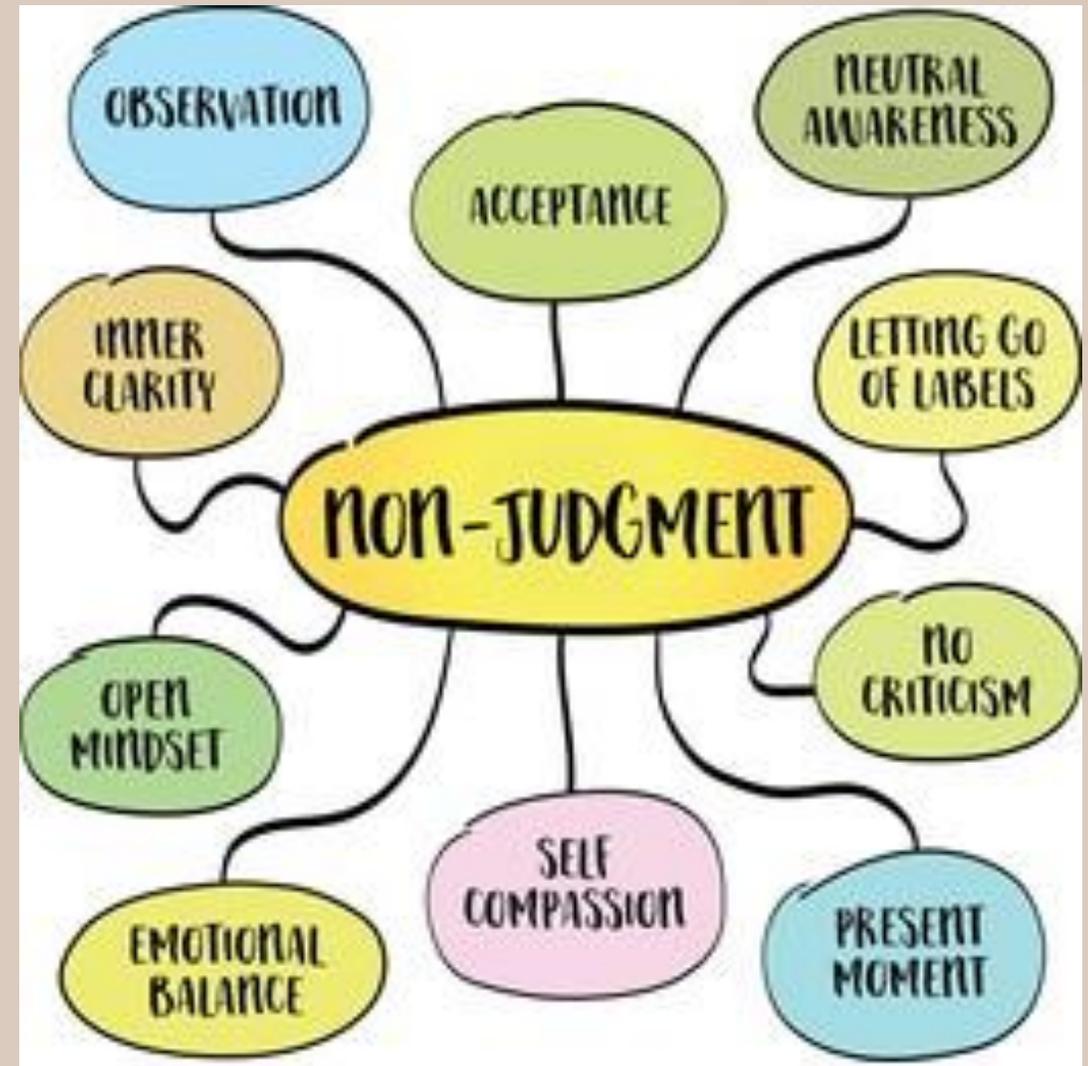
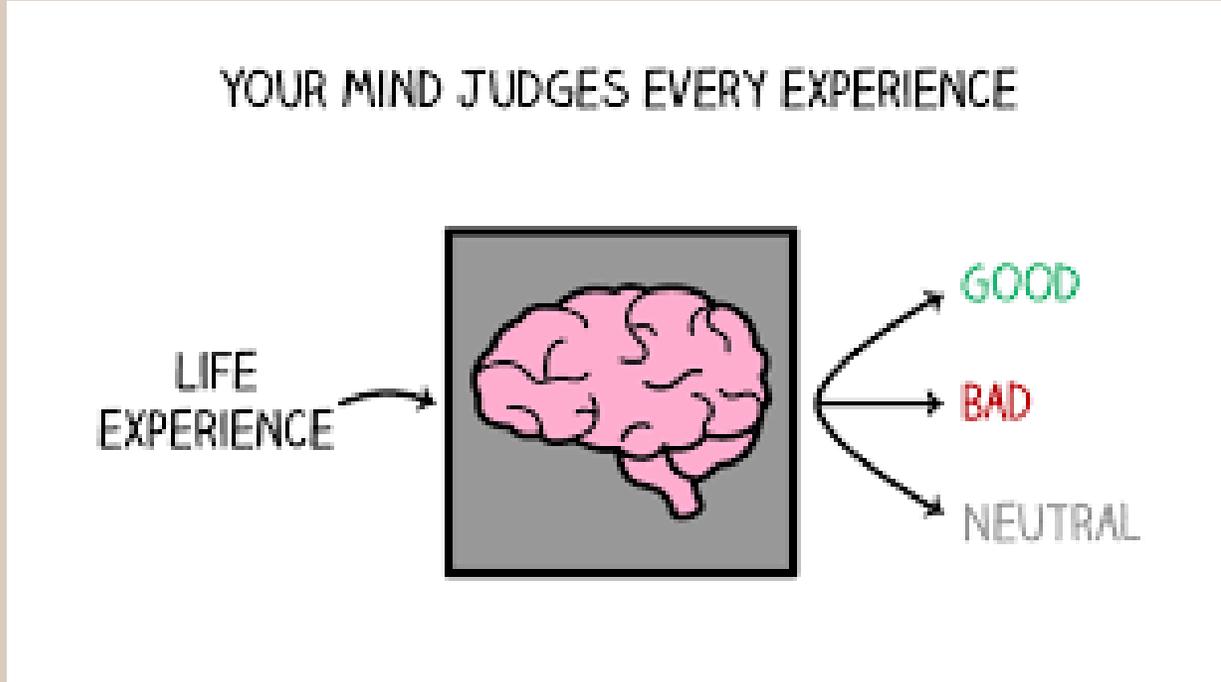
IT MAKES SENSE THAT YOU FEEL ... BECAUSE ...

# Right to Refusal



***“You’re right; I can’t make you clean up your toys. However, we play outside only after they are put away.”***

# Be Non-Judgmental



# Visuals for De-escalation

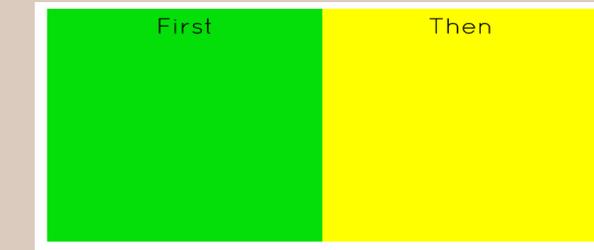
## Choice Boards

- Pictures of calming activities



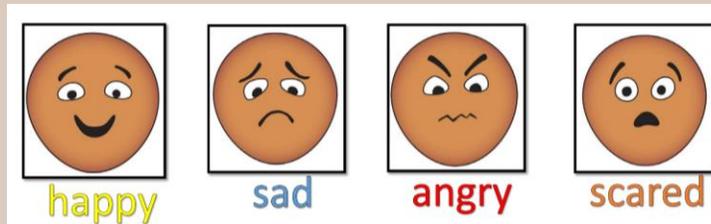
## First-Then Cards

- First: Expectation Then: Favorite Toy



## Feelings Chart

- Feelings Picture Chart



## Action Cards

- Visuals for simple actions



# Grounding Techniques

**FOCUSED-ATTENTION PRACTICES** - Use these to regain focus and prime your brain to receive new information

**CALMING**

**SIGHING:**  
With a huge deep breath, **let out the largest sigh you can.**  
Enjoy the swirling sound your voice creates when you let all the vocal energy go.



**BOX BREATHING:** □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □  
**Draw an imaginary box in the air with your finger as you breathe for four counts on your inhales and exhales as you create the shape.**  
This is a calming breath and can be repeated a few times.



**ENERGIZING**

**SHRUGGING:**  
**Shrug your shoulders up and down** with a fast breath keeping our neck loose, **followed by 5 rotations of the neck in each direction.**  
This improves circulation and the toning of the vagus nerve.



**BODY PERCUSSION:**  
Increase blood flow and circulation by **making fists and firmly drumming on your arms or legs, back and front.**  
Drum to music or create your own beat.



## The 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique

Ease your state of mind in stressful moments.

Acknowledge **5** things that you can see around you.



Acknowledge **4** things that you can touch around you.



Acknowledge **3** things that you can hear around you.



Acknowledge **1** thing that you can taste around you.



Acknowledge **2** things that you can smell around you.



# 5 WAYS TO HELP A CHILD IN MELTDOWN MODE



# Build Your Strategies Toolbox

- 6 NVCI techniques for Handling Meltdowns
- 18 De-Escalation Techniques for Defusing Meltdowns
- The Ultimate Guide for Preventing Meltdowns & Outbursts
- Meltdown Magic: Step-by-step solution for handling meltdowns
- How Visual Sensory Processing Works + Strategies for Sensory Seekers and Avoiders

# Resources

[How to Keep Calm During Difficult Parenting Moments](#)

[18 Effective De-Escalation Strategies For Defusing Meltdowns](#)

[Managing Child Meltdowns & Tantrums - Tips From A Board Certified Behavior Analyst](#)