

## **The Calm Down Trilogy: Relaxation, Distraction, Release**

The ability to calm down when angry is a developmental skill that actually begins in infancy. Angry babies may suck their thumb to self-soothe, look away as a form of distraction or scream as a release. As children mature, particularly as they develop language, they use other strategies that they learn by modeling others. While FIRED UP emphasizes addressing the underlying factors and teaching children to handle triggers before they get angry, calm down strategies are inevitably needed. There are three elements of calm down technique: relaxation, distraction, release. Relaxation strategies help calm the sympathetic nervous system that produces anger energy. Distraction techniques work to reduce the negative, hot thinking that fuels an anger episode and almost always include a relaxation components. Energy release techniques are almost always needed with children who are more explosive and whose anger is more physical.

We have an extensive list of relaxation, distraction, and release strategies in the handouts section of this module.

**Proactively Model and Practice.** Calm down strategies must be modeled and practiced repeatedly. If they are not well rehearsed, they will not be helpful in an emotional moment. (The analogy of a fire drill works well here). Telling a child calm down when they don't have the habit or skill, can create another point of conflict, and inflame the anger. Proactive, positive practice allows you to reward your child's anger control efforts and makes it far more likely that they will accept and use calm down strategies when angry.

**Early Intervention:** Relaxation strategies are effective because they calm the sympathetic nervous system that produces the anger energy and clouds our thinking. They can work, but only in the earliest stages of anger arousal. Since children don't readily recognize when they are beginning to get angry, they often don't use relaxation techniques. We have to be carefully not to suggest them to a child after it is too late. The idea of finding a distraction is also very powerful, but a child whose thinking has been clouded by anger may not as readily accept it. Since many children experience more physical explosive anger, it is often necessary quickly to move to anger release strategies before the anger energy causes too much damage.

**Calm Down Spaces.** It often difficult for children to use calm down strategies while engaged with others. The attention and negative interaction tends to accelerate or perpetuate the "fight." Children generally need calm down spaces that are removed from the situation, where they can focus on the calm down. Calm down spaces should not be selected as punishments (sitting in a chair, banished to the bedroom). They should be developed as positive opportunities to "leave the scene" and actually calm down. You can use different spaces for different types of calm downs, relaxing in the bedroom, drawing in the den, shooting baskets in the drive-way, etc.

**Calm Downs Are Not Punishments.** Please remember that calm down activities should be positive; they are not punishments. A child that enjoys music can listen to songs or play their guitar. A youngster that loves Legos can use Lego play as a distraction. A girl that plays basketball can shoot hoops as an energy release. There is too often a negative tone used when requiring a calm down, it is usually more effective to introduce them in a more positive, reassuring way. Often calm downs are confused with time outs, time outs should be considered more as restrictions, in response to persistent noncompliance or negative.

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Please see the material on the use of time out in the handout section of this module.

**Be Wary of Screen Related Calm Downs.** While many children want to use tablets or tv to calm down, do so carefully. While I have seen it work, I don't like children's over-involvement in screens. I also don't want to inadvertently reinforce negative behavior. For many children, ending the calm down and turn off the device triggers another anger episode. A sibling or classmate may perceive the calm down as a reward for misbehavior. If used, screen time calm downs must be brief, and the child must show that they clearly work. They also need to be used according to broader screen time guidelines to even consider using it.

**Use Their Interests.** Distraction strategies, sometimes times described as attention redeployment techniques, are effective because they help a child shift from angry to calm down thinking. They are most useful when they connect to a child's interests. Chess puzzles may work for a girl that enjoys chess while coloring may be more effective for a boy that likes to draw. As you might imagine, distraction activities also have a relaxation component.

**Be Creative.** There are many anger energy release strategies, more than just pounding on a pillow. It may work for some to dig in the dirt, for others to run on the treadmill and for some to pound on the drums. A child that throws things when they are angry may have a basket of balls to throw or soccer balls that they kick. I have seen youngsters calm down by popping bubble wrap, pogo sticking, stomping on cans for recycling. One boy drilled screws into a newly built desk. Be prepared to be creative.

**Different Calm Downs for Different Situations.** Calm downs that we use at home, may not work at school, at a restaurant or in a car. We need to think about what a child does within the classroom as a relaxation or distraction or with the counselor or PE teacher as a release. A child who uses jumping rope as a calm down can release energy in a parking lot or at recess. Listening to music or playing with a Rubik's cube will work in the car. Prepare different calm downs for different situations; the more broadly applicable, the better.

**Responding to Calm Down Noncompliance.** Although we strive to help children not lose their temper in the first place, there are moments when leaving the scene and calming down is necessary. Unfortunately, angry children tend to resist calm downs. We have to be careful that his resistance does not become another anger trigger. While every child and situation is different, there are strategies you can try. You can reward children when use their calm downs. You can use reassuring comments to elicit cooperation (e.g., "you are not in trouble, just take some to calm down", "I know you are angry, but please go calm down). Some children, however, need much firmer statements ("You are not in trouble yet, but you will be in big trouble if you don't calm down"). There are a variety of consequences for not accepting the calm; having to practice calm downs throughout the day before privileges are returned or having to do chores as payback for not cooperating with a calm down.

**Be Sure That Your Child Has Actually Calmed Down.** One of the most important elements of the calm down process is deciding when a child has calmed down. Arbitrary rules such as one minute

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for every year of age don't generally work. Although a child may seem calmer, his or her mindsets may still be negative, and they will remain vulnerable to the same triggers that sparked the anger initially. Since the calm down activities are not particularly punishing, and in some cases positive, it is often better to have the calm down continue longer than might seem necessary. It sometimes helps to include in the time out process some demonstration that the child is calm (such as having colored a picture, finished a puzzle, read a section of the book, etc.). Although it is sometimes necessary to return to the triggering situation, a transition activity can help avoid another meltdown. For some children, it is important to present a small task (before we go back to the game can you see if there is water in the dog's bowl). Children who are not yet calm or have a continuing negative mind set will resist the expectation.

**Sometimes a Time Out or Physical Assist is Necessary.** FIRED UP relies upon a proactive approach that addresses underlying factors and teaches children how to handle anger triggers before they lose their temper. We learn to recognize early signs of an impending explosion, moving to a calm down earlier in the anger process. Hopefully, calm downs are used to avoid aggressive and destructive anger. No matter how much FIRED UP emphasizes proactive efforts and early intervention, parents want to know what to do with the explosive child who is raging and refusing a calm down. Ignoring rage tends to invite an uncontrolled burn. Calm conversation is ineffective, and threats of consequences are often inflammatory.

While parents have hopefully developed a presence and style where even an extremely angry child will accept a calm down, there are times when we need to shift from a calm down to a time out. Time outs involve removal from the situation and a more restrictive calm down space. (Some children will accept a calm down when they know the alternative is a time out). Decisions regarding the time out space and the process for enforcing the time should be made ahead of time and vary according to the age of the child. Consultation with a clinician can be helpful. We have included more detailed information on the use of time-out in the reference section of this module.

Adults who prefer to use physical restraint instead of removals/time outs should be careful that the interaction does not extend the anger episode. Often children will rage against the restraint until they are exhausted; they are not learning how to calm down and are likely to need restraint in other anger situations. With other children, the restraint can be reinforcing and end with comforting that inadvertently reinforces the anger reaction. Parents should consider some level of a calm down or making amends process as a follow up to restraint. Remember also restraint is a technique that schools are extremely reluctant to use; most districts have very strict policies and training procedures for physical intervention