The escalation cycle is used to explain emotion or behavior during a crisis situation. The Coping Card and escalation cycle work together. We encourage you to have a Coping Card for every member of the family.

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**Escalation Cycle**

**Stages and Interventions**

**What is the escalation cycle?**

The escalation cycle is used to explain emotion or behavior during a crisis situation. It has six stages, associated with different colors; these are explained below and in the diagram on page 4. In Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, we use the escalation cycle to understand behavior and escalation, and to guide caregivers in using different interventions in each stage. The Coping Card and the escalation cycle work together.

**What are interventions?**

Interventions are the strategies or activities that we use to help children calm and manage their emotions. Our interventions vary based on the child’s level of escalation. Interventions also vary based on the type of trigger. For example, some strategies work better when children are angry, others work better when children are sad. Being aware of the emotion and your child’s level of escalation will help you choose your intervention. Some examples of different types of interventions are provided for each stage of the escalation cycle below.

1. **Baseline – the Green Zone**

Baseline, or the Green Zone, is behavior that is “normal” or typical of your child. It looks different for everyone. In this stage, people are calm, rational, and able to learn new skills and have difficult conversations. It is the best time for proactive interventions.

**Interventions** - These are some examples of baseline interventions that will support you if a trigger occurs. These interventions work best as part of a consistent daily routine:

- Make a daily schedule
- Discuss and pre-plan for triggers
- Practice and model coping skills
- Safety proof the home
- Use Coping Cards
- Create a Safety Plan

2. **Escalation – the Yellow Zone**

A trigger starts the process of escalation. Triggers are things that make people feel mad, sad or upset. During escalation, people have behavioral warning signs that show they are mad, sad, or upset. These are signals that your child needs emotion coaching and coping skills to calm. Without effective coping skills, people continue to escalate until they are in a crisis.
Escalation Cycle: Stages and Interventions

Interventions - Here are some examples of interventions that can be used during escalation:

- Emotion coach
- Try to understand why your child is behaving this way
- Use short words and clear phrases
- Provide distracting coping skills such as watching a movie, reading a book or playing a game
- Encourage your child to communicate assertively to solve the problem
- Help your child with physically calming activities such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or taking a walk
- Model healthy coping skills

3. Crisis – the Red or Blue Zone

When we are not able to effectively cope, a crisis takes place. Crisis is an unsafe period of time; people are often impulsive and reckless. They do not make good decisions when they are in crisis; they often act unsafely toward themselves, somebody else, or the physical space they’re in. In crisis, our bodies experience high levels of adrenaline, making crisis a phase that is physically hard on our bodies. There are two types of crises:

- Externalizing or Red Zone crisis - behavior is directed at others (either aggression or property destruction)
- Internalizing or Blue Zone crisis - behavior is directed at themselves

Interventions - During this phase, the only focus is on safety using these strategies:

- Follow your Safety Plan
- Use short words and clear phrases
- Make your surroundings as safe as possible
- Have only one person do the talking
- Give space, while providing appropriate supervision

4. De-escalation – the Yellow Zone

After the crisis has passed, people de-escalate and reenter the Yellow Zone. This can be a volatile phase. People are calming down and trying to burn off the adrenaline from the crisis. It can take over 30 minutes for your child’s body to return to baseline. Given this, do not rush this phase; as your child may escalate again.

Interventions – It is best to use calming coping skills, such as:

- Activities that use up energy and are socially appropriate, like going for a walk or playing outside (not activities that encourage property destruction or aggression)
- Use as few words as possible and do not talk about what just happened
- Provide your child with a coping skill without speaking (for example, model coping skills or bring them a drink or stress ball without asking)
- Encourage distraction coping skills
- Do not problem solve
5. Post-Crisis Recovery – the Gray Zone
Before people are back to their baseline and feeling “normal” or typical, it is common for them to have low energy and feel guilty, tired, hungry sad or embarrassed about the crisis. In this phase, people continue to feel the run-off of adrenaline. Your child may be physically and emotionally exhausted.

**Interventions** – Focus on caring for your child physically and emotionally by:
- Providing drinks or snacks as needed
- Not problem solving
- Not discussing consequences
- Continuing to give space if needed
- Turning down the lights (help them rest)

6. Return to Baseline – the Green Zone
After people recover from the aftermath of the adrenaline, or the post-crisis “slump,” they return back to their baseline. They are calm, stable, and able to learn again. At this point, you can discuss next-steps with your child, focusing on how to prevent the same crisis from happening again.

**Interventions** – Here are some examples of interventions you can use after your child returns to baseline:
- Discuss the triggers that led to escalation
- Discuss the coping skills they tried and why they did or did not work
- Brainstorm coping skills that may work better for the trigger(s) in the future
- Update Coping Card and/or Safety Plan
- Discuss consequences or follow up actions (emphasize natural consequences)

**Things to consider**
- Everyone’s escalation cycle is a little different. The interventions listed are suggestions for caregivers that have worked well for many children. Continue to think about other interventions that may help your child cope as you use Coping Cards and the escalation cycle.
- All emotions are OK, but all behaviors are not. For example, it is OK for a child to be angry with their sibling; it is not OK for that child to be aggressive toward their sibling.
- Remember, adults experience triggers as well. Be aware of your own escalation cycle when helping your child. You may want to pre-plan some coping skills for your own self-care.
Escalation/Yellow Zone
When we are triggered, we show warning signs. Warning signs are an early indication that a problem or "crisis" is coming. Use an intervention when you first see warning signs that your child is triggered. This may help your child avoid a crisis. Interventions work best early on and are less likely to be successful as your child becomes more escalated.

To Do:
• Listen.
• Try to understand why your child is triggered.
• Use your Safety Plan.
• Help focus your child on a coping skill.

Crisis/Red or Blue Zone
This is the emotional peak of the problem situation. This phase can include unsafe behavior toward self, others, and community, so be ready to manage safety. People don't think well when they're this upset. Your child's yelling may be a trigger that causes you or other caretakers to escalate. Be aware of your own emotional state and be ready to use coping skills during this period.

To Do:
• Use your Safety Plan.
• Give space as appropriate to keep you and your child safe.
• Use small words, short sentences; only one person should talk at a time.
• Have different expectations.

Baseline/Green Zone
Baseline behavior is behavior that is "normal" or typical. It looks different for everyone. This is the best time to talk about difficult topics, such as new rules and new schedules.

To Do:
Be proactive: There will always be problems, but there are strategies you can use to reduce them.
• Problem solve.
• Practice and model coping skills.
• Safe proof your home.
• Use and update the Coping Card.
• Create a Safety Plan.

What Are Triggers?
Triggers are experiences that make us feel mad, sad, or upset. Sometimes you can see triggers, and sometimes you can’t.

De-Escalation/Yellow Zone
The “crisis” begins to calm. Because adrenaline levels are so high, it can take over 30 minutes for everyone’s body to return to baseline functioning.

To Do:
• Do not problem solve yet. It will likely re-escalate your child.
• Adrenaline is high - focus on safe high-energy activities to “burn off” the adrenaline.
• Focus on using a coping skill.

Return To Baseline/Green Zone
Your child is calm and stable.

To Do:
• Discuss the problem: What happened? What started it? What could we have done differently? (Adult and child take turns sharing their thoughts.)
• Teach new skills.
• Discuss any consequences.
• Update the Safety Plan and Coping Card.

Post-Crisis Recovery/Gray Zone
Your child is feeling the aftermath of the adrenaline, so may be very sad, tired, remorseful, and/or hungry. They may sleep, cry, and be hard on themselves.

To Do:
• Allow time and space to calm down.
• Promote coping skills.
• Do not discuss consequences yet.
Escalation Cycle

Complete your own Escalation Cycle with help from a caregiver or therapist:
- What do your zones look like?
- What coping skill works for each zone?

1. Baseline/Green Zone
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________

2. Escalation/Yellow Zone (Warning Signs)
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________

3. Crisis/Red or Blue
   - RED (Externalizing): ________________________
   - BLUE (Internalizing): ________________________

4. De-Escalation/Yellow Zone
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________

5. Post-Crisis Recovery/Gray Zone
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________

6. Return To Baseline/Green Zone
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________
   - __________________________________________