

Escalation Cycle

Stages and Interventions

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.

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.

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

To Learn More

- Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine Clinic 206-987-2164
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

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
- Continuing to give space if needed
- Turning down the lights (help them rest)
- Not problem solving
- Not discussing consequences

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

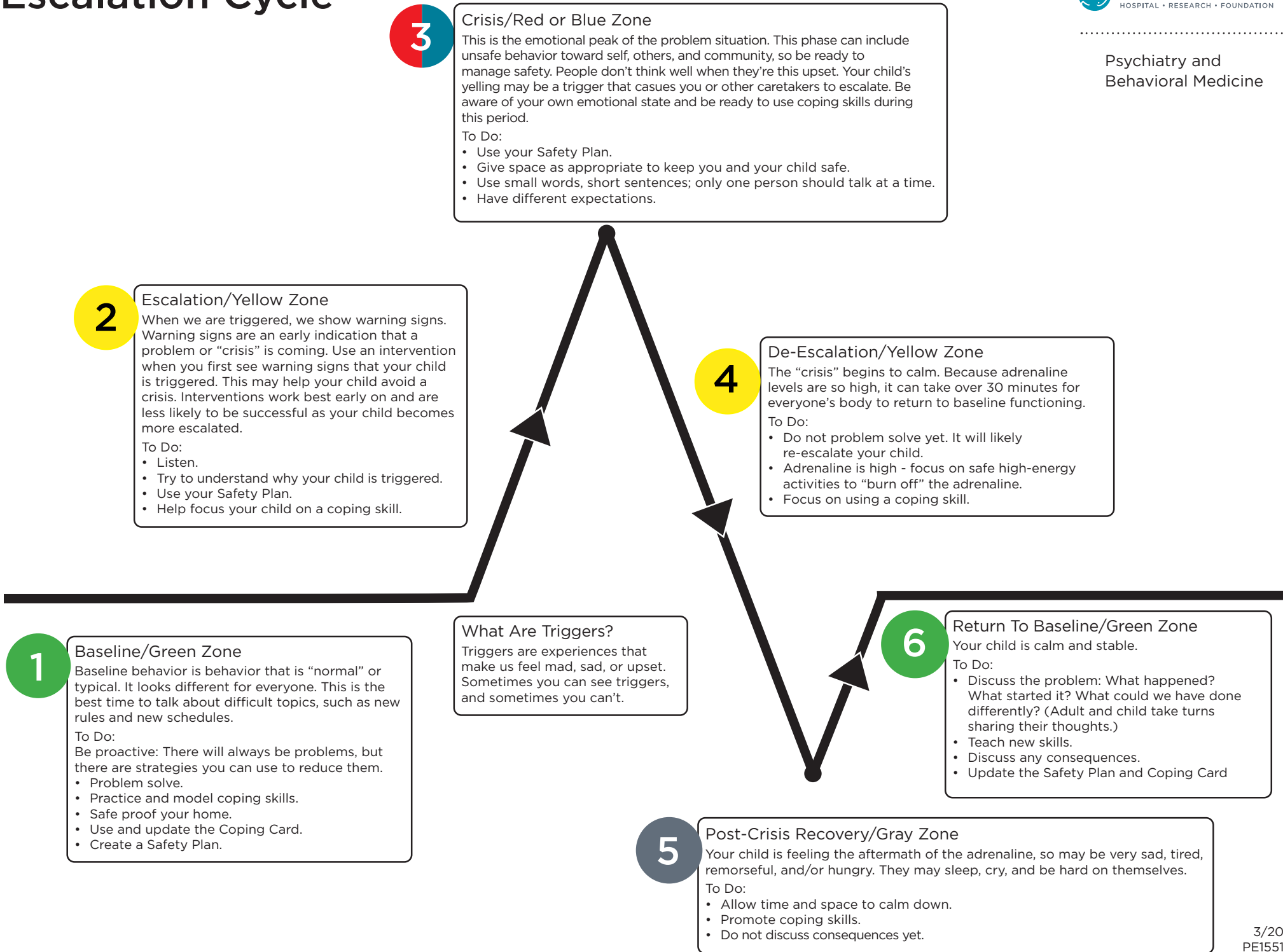
- Everyone's escalation cycle is a little different. The interventions listed are suggestions for caregivers that have worked well for many children. Continue to think about other interventions that may help your child cope as you use Coping Cards and the escalation cycle.
- All emotions are OK, but 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.

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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Escalation Cycle



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?

3

Crisis/Red or Blue

- RED (Externalizing): _____
- BLUE (Internalizing): _____

2

Escalation/Yellow Zone (Warning Signs)

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

4

De-Escalation/Yellow Zone

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

1

Baseline/Green Zone

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Triggers

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

6

Return To Baseline/Green Zone

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

5

Post-Crisis Recovery/Gray Zone

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____