



# De-escalation Methods for Caregivers & Teachers

By Diane Gould, Executive Director of PDA North America

I am a follower of the Low Arousal Model developed by Dr. Andrew McDonnell at Studio 3 in London. It was a game changer as it has adults focus on their own behavior instead of the child or student's distressed behavior. That makes much more sense to me. After working in 14 schools and consulting on children in many more, I have generally seen student behavior escalate instead of calm during crisis intervention. The norm of adults coming into the child's space and taking control is counter to what we know about humans. Touching distressed people will send them into fight or flight. We know that but we do it anyway. In part because our own nervous systems are activated. It is a situation where nobody involved can access their thinking brains. No wonder things generally go poorly.

Before I explain the Low Arousal method, I want to frame things a bit. When a child is having a meltdown or exhibiting distressed behavior, I don't think it should be classified as violence. I feel that this word sends our responses in the wrong direction. The behavior is not intentional, and the child is not in control of it. If we can accept those facts, it is easier not to take it personally and not to respond by reminding them of rules and consequences. Those things have no chance of working.

We want to spend our energy preventing meltdowns but that is not always possible. Prevention is critical in improving quality of life and building skills. When meltdowns or challenging episodes happen, we want to focus on not making it worse. That is the best we can often do. Preventatively, it is good to have a crisis plan with other siblings (or students) to keep them safe. They should leave the area (with a cue) and know where to go and what to do. That way your focus is less divided.

I think this quote is good to keep in mind. Or on your refrigerator:

“When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos.” -L.R. Knost

# The Low Arousal Approach

## Escalation phase:

- Keep calm- or try to appear least appear calm
- Avoid dominating behavior, so no eye contact
- Talk in a calm voice without tension in your jaw
- Keep a distance. Step back, don't follow. Any time you are giving a demand, step back
- Sit down if possible
- Don't stand face to face
- Avoid emphasizing yourself
- Change staff or adult if that is possible or seems like a good idea
- Create a diversion
- Sometimes you have to "give in"
- Show you understand
- Empathize

## Chaos phase:

- Wait! It is often enough, and the crisis may pass without you doing anything
- Make other people leave the area
- Avoid touching child
- Do not leave the child alone

## De-escalation phase:

- Stay calm
- Wait
- If there is a mess, an adult cleans it up
- Divert onwards. Get back to normal ASAP. Have a drink and sit quietly. You don't have to talk. Trying to force people to talk does not work. Provide comfort.

## After:

- Keep a list of what demands or expectations the person could not handle
- How do we make changes in how we interact with the child and our expectations?
- Focus on the repair of the relationship
- Don't rehash the incident
- Don't review expectations
- There really is no need to process it. You will have another chance to do it proactively.

**References:**

<https://www.studio3.org>

[https://www.studio3.org/\\_files/ugd/bd7f52\\_7fd84366a1b14b5892cb550e52a9bfc0.pdf](https://www.studio3.org/_files/ugd/bd7f52_7fd84366a1b14b5892cb550e52a9bfc0.pdf)

[https://www.studio3.org/\\_files/ugd/bd7f52\\_d175919a25464f52bfb2e59e1e424a9c.pdf?index=true](https://www.studio3.org/_files/ugd/bd7f52_d175919a25464f52bfb2e59e1e424a9c.pdf?index=true)

McDonnell ,Andrew (2019) The Reflective Journey: A Practioner’s Guide to the Low Arousal approach. Great Britan: Studio 3

McDonnell, Andrew (2010) Managing Aggressive Behaviours in Care Settings: Understanding and Applying Low Arousal Approaches. UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Hejlskov Elven, Bo (2010) No fighting, No biting, No screaming: How to Make Behaving Positively Possible for People with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.