

De-escalation Techniques for 4-H Agents in the 4-H Camp Setting

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Figure 1: Image of Camp Craft with smiling Sun

Introduction

As a 4-H agent or volunteer leader, addressing negative emotions and behaviors, whether in the 4-H camp setting or in a classroom, can prove difficult and taxing. However, it is important to understand that most behaviors have a deeper cause and often can be de-escalated using trauma-informed techniques. When youth are at 4-H camp, they often experience independence they are not used to and may be away from home for the first time. This newfound freedom to make choices can sometimes lead to stress, frustration or conflict. By using de-escalation techniques, 4-H agents can help 4-H'ers better regulate their emotions, resolve conflicts and quickly return to actively participating in 4-H camp activities. This publication serves as a resource for 4-H professionals on trauma-informed de-escalation techniques that can be utilized in the 4-H camp setting.



Figure 2: Summary of de-escalation aspects

What Does It Mean to De-escalate?

De-escalation at its core is the concept of reducing “the intensity of a conflict or potentially violent situation” (Burgess, 2013). When working with youth, there will be times when you are faced with helping a 4-H'er work through negative behavior and emotions. Addressing that behavior can reduce stress on the agent and overall disruption to the activity at hand (Kelly et al., 2023)

Key Aspects of De-escalation

How you approach the situation can set the stage for how the student responds:

- Stay calm, be mindful of tone and body language
- Make sure the space is safe
- Give yourself and the 4-H'er space to breathe
- Actively listen so the 4-H'er feels heard
- Model calm behavior (Price & Baker, 2012)

Recognizing When a 4-H'er May be in Crisis

It can sometimes be difficult to recognize the signs that a 4-H'er may be in crisis. Some signs may include:

- Mood swings
- Extreme anxiety
- Angry outbursts
- Changes in eating habits
- Avoiding others
- Loss of interest in fun activities (Child Focus, 2024)

When you identify that a 4-H'er may be in an active crisis, it is important to respond kindly while remaining calm and supportive to ensure your response is effective.

De-escalating Negative Behaviors

Youth may act out for a variety of different reasons; one thing remains consistent: when addressing negative behaviors, the focus should be on taking immediate action to stop distracting behaviors, so the group can refocus and resume the task or experience at hand.

Some strategies for mitigating negative behaviors for 4-H'ers are as follows:

- Use calm and clear communication. Offering students simplified and concise directions in a calm tone can help reduce stress and prevent campers from becoming overwhelmed (Saidinejad et al., 2024).
- Give the 4-H'er space. Don't stand too close to the 4-H'er. Standing at an angle and keeping two arm's length of space can make a 4-H'er feel safer and allow them space to process their emotions (Johnston et al., 2022).
- Reduce loud noises and stress. If possible, move the 4-H'er away from the group or guide the rest of the group to another activity. One-to-one interaction makes de-escalation easier (Saidinejad et al., 2024). 4-H Centers have sensory-friendly areas with activities that would be the perfect place to help a 4-H'er regulate their emotions.
- Encourage physical movement. Camp is the perfect place to direct 4-H'ers to an activity that engages them physically. Engaging in activities such as walking, stretching or other active games can help 4-H'ers reset and calm down (Mittiga et al., 2024).
- Don't use too many words or give too many instructions when a 4-H'er is having a meltdown. Keep things simple but give the 4-H'er choices.
 - For example: "I know you're feeling upset. To help you feel better, you can take a 10-minute break, or we can walk around camp."
- Giving 4-H'ers simple choices allows 4-H'ers to regain their sense of control while not requiring them to think intensely (R. Ross, personal communication, November 2025).
- If a 4-H'er keeps bringing up the situation, acknowledge that you've heard them but continuously redirect them toward activities that will help them regulate their behavior. Don't spend too much time focusing on the child learning that what they did was negative; there will be time for learning after the meltdown has ended (R. Ross, personal communication, November 2025).
 - For example: "You can take a break or go for a walk."

De-escalating Negative Emotions

Emotional regulation is a skill that one develops over time. The brain is not fully developed until the age of 25, which may lead to more emotional reactions with less ability to self-regulate (Fetterman et al., n.d.). Helping a 4-H'er regulate emotions in environments with limited sleep, high temperatures and dehydration can be especially challenging (Sharma et al., 2025). The following tactics can prove helpful in navigating de-escalation when a 4-H'er is experiencing negative emotions:

- Validate the 4-H'er's emotions: During an outburst, 4-H'ers may feel misunderstood. Repeating back to a 4-H member the feelings they are experiencing can help them feel understood (Sharma et al., 2025).
 - For example: "I see you are upset because that game of 4-square didn't feel fair."
- Positive self-talk: Reframe negative self-talk to positive affirmations to refocus the 4-H'er's emotional frustration into seeing mistakes or the cause of their outburst as a learning opportunity (Sayis et al., 2024)
 - For example, an agent can say, "Repeat after me, I tried my best, and that counts."
- Breathing and grounding techniques: While at camp, a fantastic resource for 4-H'ers to regulate their emotions can be mindfulness and breathing. Grounding techniques, such as sensory checks (e.g., naming five things you see, four things you hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, etc.), can help shift a 4-H'er's focus from their emotions to what is happening in the present.
- If a 4-H'er continues to meltdown longer than 20 minutes, take them to another location or ask another 4-H agent for help. Something in the environment may be prolonging the meltdown (R. Ross, personal communication, November 2025)

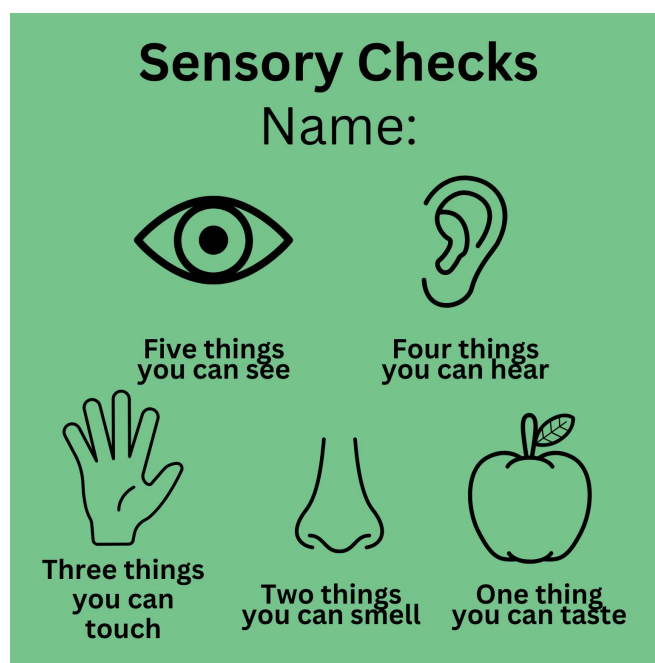


Figure 3: Sensory Check example

Creating Calm Spaces for Neurodivergent 4-H'ers

Neurodivergent is a term used to describe individuals with differences in how their brains process information (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Helping 4-H'ers regulate their behavior, emotions and mental health can be challenging, especially when their needs vary. It is essential to consider the diverse needs of 4-H'ers, as what works for one individual may not be effective for a neurodivergent 4-H'er, including those with autism, attention deficit disorder and other sensory processing disorders. Some trauma-informed strategies for navigating de-escalation with neurodivergent 4-H'ers are as follows:

- Reduce sensory overload: If the outburst occurs in a loud, bright environment, move to a quieter space that allows the 4-H'er to process more easily (Clement et al., 2022).
- Allow the 4-H'er to practice "stimming," which is a repetitive self-soothing action (CHOP, 2020), so long as they do not cause physical harm (Tancredi & Abrahamson, 2024).

Summary

In summary, de-escalating a 4-H'er's outburst is not about controlling the 4-H'er's behavior. De-escalation is about helping the 4-H'er work through and learn to manage their emotions. By meaningfully connecting with the 4-H'er, listening to their concerns, and regulating your own response, you can help create a safe space. By using informed approaches and responding intentionally and with patience, 4-H agents can help youth build the skills needed to manage their behavior and emotions, thereby returning to meaningful learning activities. Therefore, creating an inclusive camping experience enables youth to thrive.

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