

Keeping Our Cool When Things Get Heated

By Louise Southern, M.Ed., BCBA

I am not the parent of a child with autism, but I am a parent. I know that it can be really hard for me to keep my cool sometimes when my young child starts to fall apart – screaming, dropping to the floor, and being noncompliant. But I also know that I will never make the situation better if I escalate right along with him. In the effort to maintain “control” over him and the situation, if I lose control of my emotions, everything really spirals out of control. Some parents of children, teens, and adults with autism encounter very challenging, persistent behaviors that may come in many forms: aggression, property destruction, screaming and

crying, noncompliance, refusals, verbal threats, arguing, self-injury, and more. As such episodes occur, here are a few basic guidelines to consider:

Ration your words, or stop talking altogether

When an individual with autism is highly agitated, they may struggle to effectively process information delivered verbally. Excessive verbal engagement in the midst of escalation is likely to only further escalate and confuse the individual. If possible, temporarily disengage to give processing time and physical space until the individual is calmer.

Rely on visual supports to convey contingencies, expectations

A visual schedule can also be used during challenging transitions and in the midst of an escalating episode. If the individual has difficulty transitioning from one activity to the next, wants something right now, or is struggling to persist through an activity, you can use the visual schedule to clarify when he will be able to access something that he wants. When an individual is confused or agitated, he might be able to process visual information more effectively.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to simply use a “first-then” schedule (for example, a schedule that shows “first math homework, then computer”). This visual representation can serve to operate as a non-negotiable rule that parents hold their ground on. The visual reduces the need for continued verbal engagement and minimizes the social attention that the individual might receive from us for the noncompliant behavior.

Depending on the individual’s level of understanding, you might:

- Point to schedule icons/picture cues that show the contingency (the first __, then __, sequence)
- Show the contingency on a tablet app
- Write down the contingency
- Text the contingency to his cell phone

Also consider using a visual timer that depicts the passage of time in a way that the individual can understand, such as on a cell phone, kitchen timer, the Time Timer, small hourglass, or tablet application. This supports the individual in waiting for a desired activity and/or persisting through a less preferred activity. The individual’s frustration and anxiety is more likely to escalate if he does not understand how long something will last.



Visually represent the options

Forced choice procedures may be useful when the individual wants something that he cannot have in that moment. Clarify for him in concrete (and visual terms whenever possible) what he can have in that moment. The visual choices can operate as a non-negotiable “menu” that parents hold their ground on. As with other visual tools, the menu reduces the need for continued social engagement between parent and child in the midst of escalation. Rather than simply saying “no, you cannot have Wii right now,” you can concretely present alternatives to the individual that he might accept. In this way, the individual may also feel more empowered because he has options. Depending on the individual’s level of understanding, you might present these options:

- By presenting the actual objects available in that moment, such as a puzzle, book or Play-Doh
- By pointing to picture/icon cards that show available options
- By showing available options on a tablet device app
- By presenting a written list of available options
- By texting the individual his/her options in that moment

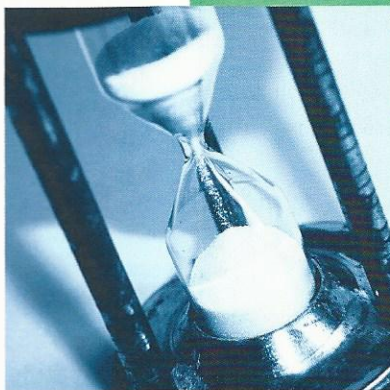
There is a misconception among some that visual supports such as schedules and choice menus are only applicable for young children or individuals who are more severely affected by their autism. Yet in our experience, such visual supports can be highly effective tools for those with high-functioning autism and Asperger’s as well. Remember, the visual support reduces the need for continued verbal escalation, arguing, and negotiations in the midst of an episode.

Direct them to their calm-down space, their calming routine

If the individual needs time to calm down before he can be successfully engaged, direct him to a comfortable and safe area. Provide materials that are soothing or calming. Some individuals can follow picture-based or written calming plans that show what to do to calm down. Be aware that the individual must practice and learn these routines when he is calm – as with all of us, it is very difficult to learn when he is already upset.

Positively frame your language

Try to frame verbal directives so that the individual hears what to do, instead of what not to do in a given situation. For example, say “please sit down” instead of “don’t do that!” Try to respond in a calm, neutral manner as you deliver such directives.



Minimize social attention to the challenging behavior:

What do I mean by social attention? Social attention can be defined as strong emotional responses from you, corrective verbal feedback such as “no sir” “stop” “that’s not nice,” verbal argument, eye contact, gestures or facial expressions from you that signal disapproval, and yelling/screaming. Instead, be calm, be neutral. This may seem counterintuitive – and it is really hard to do at times – but the reason to avoid giving any social attention to the challenging behaviors is because attention to these behaviors might reinforce the behaviors and increase the likelihood that they occur again.

It is very important to remember that if the individual is accustomed to getting social attention from you in the midst of challenging behavior, and now you try to stop giving it, the individual may try even harder to get your attention via challenging behaviors. In other words, it could get worse before it gets better. Be prepared to ride this out and know that it really can get better if everyone is consistent in their responses to challenging behavior.

Note that giving no social attention to the challenging behavior is not the same as ignoring the person. Also note that ignoring the challenging behavior is not the same as just letting the behavior continue without any form of intervention. You can still direct them to a calming area or present the visual schedule, choices, or timer. You should also continue to monitor for safety while disengaged.

No one is perfect, and it is impossible to be calm and cool all of the time. Know that as parents, you are doing your best. Finally, try to remember that you are not alone and we at ASNC want to help! ■

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