

At-Risk for Early Childhood Educators



Overview

Thank you for choosing *At-Risk for Early Childhood Educators* as a part of your program's professional development programming.

After educators and staff have completed the program individually, it's best to gather them to discuss the material and their experiences. It's also a chance for participants to ask questions and think about how to apply what they learned in your school. This guide helps you facilitate that discussion.

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Group Discussion

Peoples' experiences with the simulation will naturally vary, due to the ability to take different paths in the simulated conversations. For example, depending on the choices they made, early childhood educators may or may not have learned about all the concerns and motivations of the virtual child and parents in the simulation. The feedback they get will also vary with their choices. As a result, they may express a variety of opinions and diversity of experience within the simulation.

It can be valuable to use this guide as a jumping-point to follow the interests and experiences of the participants. Please do so whenever you feel that would increase the impact of the simulation!

Three other helpful tools for leading the discussion are:

- *Discussion Guide Slides*, which display the content of this guide on-screen.
- *Summary of Content*, which reiterates key information from the simulation.
- *Participant Guide Handout*, which provides the learner with a snapshot of the key knowledge and skills.

And depending on your program's policies for talking with caregivers, another helpful resource is:

- *Making an Action Plan Handout*, which provides the learner a guide to collaborate with caregivers.

The Summary of Content, Participant Guide Handout, and Making an Action Plan Handout are attached to this document.

This discussion should take about 1 hour and 10 minutes. It can occur immediately after participants take the simulation (for example, when all participants are in a computer lab completing the program together) or at a later date.

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Preparation

Below is a checklist to use.

- Lead Team Preparation:** Pull together a referral team to ensure that the process for raising concerns and the program's referral procedure are defined. As a team, discuss the following prompt questions. These answers will be used during the discussion so all staff feel confident that they understand program-specific policies, expectations, and resources. Staff can fill out the Participant Guide Handout during the discussion with appropriate answers, or you can fill them into the Handout ahead of time.

Q: If I'm concerned about a child, what is our school protocol for raising and addressing those concerns? Ex: With whom should I share my concerns? What are the procedures (how it happens - what are the exact steps)? What rules and policies are in place to guide actions?

Q: What resources are available to me as a staff member if I'm concerned about a child?

- Review:** Look over the rest of the Discussion Guide and Making an Action Plan Handout, so you can become familiar with the questions you'll be asking the group and get an idea of what kinds of questions and concerns may arise during the discussion. Decide which questions you feel are most important to make time for, as you might not have time for all of them. Edit the Discussion Guide Slides to include only the questions you plan to cover.

- Participant Training:** Have participants complete the simulation. The simulation takes about 50 minutes to complete and can be taken in multiple sittings. Email staff to let them know about the training and details on when and how to take the simulation.—We have provided several templates for you to use to let teachers and staff know about the Kognito Training. You can use these to personalize your communications in a way that fits with your goals and school voice. These are available in the Spread Word section on <https://kognitocampus.com/>
 - Promotional Flyer (Includes login instructions)
 - Promotional Text (Staff Email Template)

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- Location/Timing:** For the discussion, consider choosing a location you feel is most conducive, possibly where participants can sit in a circle and see each other as they share answers. The discussion can occur immediately following the training or during a regularly scheduled group meeting, once all participants have completed the simulation individually.
- Computer Access (OPTIONAL):** Consider choosing a location with a computer, projector, and speakers for the discussion so you can refer to the simulation during the discussion.
- Summary of Content:** Print out the attached copies of the Summary of Content, Participant Guide Handout, and Making an Action Plan Handout (used with the discussion leader's discretion) to distribute to participants and refer to throughout the discussion.

Please Note: The conversation skills featured in this simulation can be used across early childhood settings. However, each program has its own process for talking to caregivers. Check in with your program's policy or administration prior to putting these conversational skills into practice with caregivers.

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- Introduction**—The purpose of the following exercises is to revisit and extend the learning around handling challenging behavior, identifying students who may need more support, and bringing up concerns with caregivers.

- Preparation/Materials**—Writing Instruments

- Time**—1 Hour, 10 Minutes

- Participation Handouts**—Summary of Content Handout, Participant Guide Handout, Making an Action Plan Handout

- Discussion Guide Slides:** Slides 1-23

- If you choose to do the simulation together as a group prior to the discussion, use Slides 1-9 to introduce the simulation. You can also download the “Simulation Trailer” and the “Login Tutorial” video to introduce the learning and the simulation.

Take Some Time to Write

Please take some time to reflect on your own experience and write about the following:

Q. When you hear the terms “at-risk” or “at-risk students,” what do they mean to you? What kinds of things could young children be at risk for?

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Once five minutes have passed, or when most participants have written a page, ask them if they would like to share some of what they wrote. You could say, *“First we will have some people read what they wrote (a paragraph or a page) and then we will talk about any connections you made as you were listening. Please jot these down so you will remember them.”*

After your participants have shared, you can reinforce the unique needs presented in an early childhood setting and say:

This simulation focuses on the topic of at-risk youth a bit differently than other simulations in Kognito’s At-Risk Suite. For older children, it’s recommended to identify students that need extra support, approach them and encourage them to share and process what they’re feeling, and if needed, refer them to local resources and other forms of support. Many times, students need extra support if there are warning signs of distress, substance use, suicidal ideation, etc.

For younger children, this simulation departs from this approach since it focuses on the adults responsible for handling challenging behavior and talking with caregivers. This helps identify and refer children in need of extra support. It also provides an opportunity to talk with the student’s caregivers (depending on your program’s policy) and build an action plan together.

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Discussion Questions: Understanding Challenging Behavior

Take a moment to review the example students Tommy, Renee, and Annie in the Summary of Content Handout. Each of them showed signs that may need extra support. We can look out for:

- Patterns of negative behavior
- Changes in behavior
- Something that feels off

Sometimes, this pattern of negative behavior or behavior change can be caused by an underlying problem such as a developmental delay, a mental health issue, or a stressful environment.

QUESTIONS

- Q.** Were there any signs in the Tommy, Renee, and Annie examples that surprised you?
- Q.** Think of a time when you trusted a feeling that something was off. What “clued you in,” and what did you do to support the student?

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Discussion Questions: Addressing Challenging Behavior

In your first conversation with Eli, you helped him regulate his behavior and refocused the class. You accomplished this by using these techniques:

1. **Check in with yourself** to manage your own emotions and set a good example for Eli.
2. **Use neutral words and a neutral tone**, so Eli doesn't feel like he's in trouble.
3. **Focus on positive behavior**, rather than focusing on what he's doing wrong.
4. **Give Eli choices** of ways to calm down, which helps him feel in control.

QUESTION

- Q.** Which of the skills practiced in this conversation come easiest to you? Which one/s do you need to practice more? What makes some of these skills challenging?

In a follow-up conversation, you debriefed with Eli by helping him identify the feelings he felt at Circle Time and problem-solve for the future.

QUESTIONS

- Q.** What are some ways you can teach students how to use a safe space (like a “cozy corner”)?
- Q.** How do you know when to discipline a student and when to encourage them to open up?

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Discussion Questions: Planning Ahead

There are several ways you can develop a caring, safe-feeling atmosphere for all your students:

1. **Set expectations for your space.**
2. **Talk about expectations and feelings.**
3. **Teach feeling words** and help children connect words to what they're feeling.
4. **Ask students how they're feeling** to help them identify emotions and let you know what they need.
5. **Practice breathing and movement exercises.**
6. **Plan ahead** with your teaching team, especially for high-stress moments and situations that might escalate certain behavior.

QUESTIONS

- Q.** What are some ways you can talk about expectations and feelings with your students?
- Q.** Think of a time when a high-stress moment pushed your students' buttons or escalated certain behaviors. What can you do to plan ahead for these moments?

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Discussion Questions: Talking with a Caregiver

In your conversation with Eli's mom, Rosa, you talked about Eli's behavior without making her defensive and causing her to shut down. This can be achieved by:

1. **Setting a tone of trust and caring.**
2. **Sharing your observations** about where Eli needs more support and what approaches have been working.
3. **Learning about Eli's behavior** at home and what Rosa does in response.
4. **Collaborating on a plan.**

QUESTIONS

- Q.** Think of a time when you talked with a caregiver about a child's behavior. How did this experience impact you, the caregiver, and the student? What could you have done differently?
- Q.** What phrases tend to put caregivers on the defensive? (Some possible answers if discussion stalls: "Your child can't control himself." "If her behavior doesn't improve, then this school isn't the place for her.") How is that different from approaching caregivers as a collaborative partner?

Please Note: The conversation skills featured in this simulation can be used across early childhood settings. However, each program has its own process for talking to caregivers. Remind staff to check in with your program's policy or administration before a discussion with a caregiver.

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Discussion Questions: Building Relationships

When you were talking with Sophia’s grandfather, Leroy, you had to change your approach in the middle of the conversation. Leroy seemed to need more time to build up trust, so you had to switch from sharing observations to building a relationship. Along the way, you were able to learn some important information about why Sophia might be struggling and show Leroy you’re supporting her.

QUESTION

Q. How do you know when to dig deeper in a conversation with a caregiver and when to continue at a later time? What are some effective ways to stay in contact with that caregiver?

Making an Action Plan

When you show caregivers you want to work with them to support their child, you gain a partner. After sharing your observations and concerns, ask these questions to help create an action plan together.

Q. What strategies seem to be working at school? How can these strategies be useful to the caregiver?

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QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Q. What strategies seem to be working at home? How can these be adopted in school?

Q. What are some ideas for next steps if concerns continue?

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Next Steps

Your program may have its own protocol for identifying and following up with a child who you are concerned about. Ask these questions to align your next steps with your program's policies.

QUESTIONS

Q. If I'm concerned about a child, what is our school protocol for raising and addressing those concerns? Ex: With whom should I share my concerns? What are the procedures (how it happens - what are the exact steps)? What rules and policies are in place to guide actions?

Q. What resources are available to me as a staff member if I'm concerned about a child?

Wrapping Up

Thank you for taking the time to complete the simulation and have this discussion. When children have challenges, it's often because they're feeling overwhelmed by their emotions or an underlying problem - and they don't know what to do. By finding new ways for them to manage their emotions, helping them problem-solve, and connecting with caregivers, we can set our students up for success.

At-Risk for Early Childhood Educators

Learn how to handle challenging behavior, identify students who may need more support, and bring up concerns with caregivers.

You'll practice these skills in role-play conversations with fully animated and interactive students and caregivers.

Access The Simulation
<https://www.kognitocampus.com>

Understanding Challenging Behavior

It's not easy to know how to respond to difficult behavior in our classrooms. Some of this behavior, like tantrums or arguments, can be addressed in the moment. Other behavior feels more significant and harder to address.

What are some signs that a student might need extra support? We can look out for:

- **patterns** of negative behavior AND
- **changes** in behavior

In addition to watching out for these signs, it's also important to **trust yourself** to know when something with a student is off.

What might be causing a pattern of negative behavior or a behavior change?

Some students feel overwhelmed because of an underlying problem, like a **developmental delay**. Others might be experiencing a **mental health issue**. And some might be reacting to a **stressful environment**. Some children might be experiencing two or more of these at once.

It isn't our job to diagnose these issues. But we can identify who might need help and we can be part of a larger "village" that supports them. Helping students in small ways can make a big difference for them, and it makes our classrooms run smoother, too.

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Here are **three examples of students** who need some extra support:

1. Pattern of Negative Behavior

Tommy was hitting, and it often happened during transitions. He was clearly frustrated, but it wasn't clear why until he had a hearing test that showed that his hearing was an issue.

2. Change in Behavior

Renee was toilet trained and suddenly started having accidents. It turned out her dog had died and she was extremely upset.

3. Something Felt Off

Annie was very quiet and kept to herself. It was easy to overlook her because she wasn't disruptive--but something didn't feel right. Turns out she'd seen violence in her neighborhood and was having a hard time coping.

Building Relationships With Caregivers and Students is Key

- In each case above, the caregiver had critical information—like knowing about Renee's dog. Or the caregiver was a critical part of addressing the problem—like Tommy getting a hearing aid and helping Annie see a psychologist.
- Day-to-day, there are lots of chances for us to connect with young children, help them manage their emotions, and build relationships with their families. The relationships children have at a young age lay the foundation for how they go on to build relationships of their own. And the relationships you have with them have a lifelong impact on their development.

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Addressing Challenging Behavior

Here are some approaches that can help you de-escalate a difficult situation:

- **Check in with yourself.** This helps manage your own emotions. Similar to airplane oxygen masks: the adult always puts theirs on first before helping a child. It also sets a good example for children.
 - *“How am I feeling right now?”*
 - *“What does the child need right now?”* changes in behavior
- **Use neutral words and a neutral tone** so children don't feel they're in trouble.
 - ❌ *“You were misbehaving during arts and crafts.”*
 - ✅ *“You had a lot of feelings during arts and crafts.”*
- **Reinforce the behaviors you want to see**, rather than focusing on what they're doing wrong.
 - ❌ *“Great job not yelling!”*
 - ✅ *“Great job using your inside voice!”*
- **Give children choices** of ways to calm down. This creates a chance to practice and helps them feel in control.
 - *“Do you want to scoot near me or stand?”*

After you de-escalate, it's important to “debrief”: help the child calm down, then help them find better ways to communicate. In addition to the approaches above, you can also:

- **Get them to brainstorm or role-play** what they could do next time. This helps them develop a set of tools.
 - Teacher: *“What can you say next time you're feeling angry and need some space?”*
 - Child: *“I can say I need some space, please.”*
- **Create a safe space or cozy corner** to help children regulate themselves. This isn't a “time out spot” for punishing students. It's a safe, cozy space for students to think and calm down. Teach them how to use it before they need to.

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Case Study: Eli in The Classroom

Ms. Kelly and her co-teacher Ms. Zoe have 20 students in their class. Here's what we know about Eli, one of their students.

- Eli is four and very social.
- He sometimes has trouble *regulating* his body.
- When Eli is excited or frustrated, he can get too close to his friends' faces, and hug them tightly. You've noticed a pattern: sometimes that results in Eli accidentally hitting or kicking them.

During circle time today, Ms. Kelly was reading a book about whales. Eli got very excited and wanted to get closer. He started waving his arms and stomping his feet, accidentally hitting his friend Marcus. Marcus wasn't hurt, but he was upset and shouted: "Eli pushed me!"

There were two ways Ms. Kelly wanted to support Eli and the class in this moment:

1. Help Eli Regulate Himself

Ms. Kelly: "It's important that we all feel comfortable. Let's remember all the different ways we talked about sitting: there's criss-cross applesauce or having our legs out in front of us. And don't forget, you can stand if your body would feel more comfortable that way! Now, everyone think, is my body comfy? Am I far enough away from my friends? Can I see the book?"

2. Refocus the Class on the Activity

Ms. Kelly: "Now, it's good that we're all so excited about the ocean, but we have to remember our inside voices. Before we go on, let's all count to five. Everyone ready? Let's count together."

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Case Study: A Chat With Eli

Sometimes even when you do everything right, children can still be upset. Ms. Kelly gave Eli a choice between standing and scooting near her, but he continued to be upset. He chose to go to the cozy corner while Ms. Kelly finished the activity with the group. She made sure to give him a few minutes alone to calm himself down. Afterward, while the other children were at mini-activity stations, Ms. Kelly went to check in with Eli at the cozy corner. Here are the goals Ms. Kelly had in her conversation with Eli and the way she accomplished them.

1. Check in with Eli

Ms. Kelly: “A lot of stuff happened at Circle Time. How are you feeling now? Sometimes it’s hard to understand our feelings. But maybe we can take some time now and talk together. How does that sound?”

2. Help him identify his feelings

Eli: “Yeah. The ocean is big! And whales are BIG! And I wanted to see, but Marcus was in the way and I didn’t like it.”

Ms. Kelly: “Because you were excited about the ocean, you were worried about not being able to see.”

3. Help him problem-solve for the future

Ms. Kelly: “What can you do if you can’t see the book?” *ELI:* “Uhhh... move.”

Ms. Kelly: “That’s right, you can move closer to me.” *ELI:* “I like being close to you.”

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Planning Ahead

A positive atmosphere can be very helpful to children who are struggling or come to school feeling stressed.

There are a several ways you can develop a caring, safe-feeling atmosphere for all your students. You probably do some of these already.

- **Set expectations for your space**, including a daily schedule. Write them down and add visuals.
- **Talk about expectations and feelings** throughout the day. For example, before circle time you might talk about expectations around steady bodies and taking turns while talking. You could share some strategies like raising hands, and discuss how it makes everyone feel when we sit still and listen to each other.
- **Teach feeling words** and help children connect words to what they're feeling. Story time is great for this. It helps children express themselves using a common language.
- Start the day by asking students how they're feeling. This helps them identify feelings, and lets you know what they might need.
- **Practice breathing and movement exercises** with students. This gives everyone a chance to pause and calm down.
- **Plan ahead** with your teaching team. Strategize for high-stress moments like shift changes and transitions. Talk about what situations push your students' buttons and what behaviors signal an escalation. For example, with Eli you know to keep an eye out during circle time!

Making these things a routine part of the day means you won't need to work as hard in the moment. And you'll notice when a child may need extra support.

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Talking with a Caregiver

When conversations with our students' caregivers go well, we gain a partner. There's a lot you can do to support the child and address concerns or underlying issues together. A few quick conversations with caregivers can save us a lot of time, work, and stress. And children can tell you're working together--so that might give you a little more leverage in school.

How can we make sure that these conversations go well?

- **Build trust and set a tone of caring.** Building trust with a caregiver goes a long way toward making conversations easier. Even small chats at drop-off and pick-up can really nurture the relationship.
But sometimes we need to raise a concern very early in the relationship (see Leroy's Case Study). In those cases, we have to take extra care to set the right tone. Since we need their help and trust, it's no use trying to rush things. Next steps could be as small as finding another time to talk.
- **Check in with yourself** and examine your feelings. That will help you keep your cool. Anticipate what might upset them. If they do get upset, it's good to take a second and check in with yourself again.
- **Start with strengths.** Share examples of what the child is doing well, to show you see the child is more than their difficult moments, that you're on their side.
Describe the behavior, and the larger pattern, with neutral and descriptive language.
 - ✘ *"Mason was mean and got aggressive with another child."*
 - ✔ *"Mason hit another child with his arm at the park."*
- **Get the caregiver's perspective.** They're the expert on the child outside of class, so show them you value their input. Ask what they've noticed and what strategies work for them.
- **Collaborate on a plan.** This might include trying some things that work at home or seeing if they might want to try something that works at school.

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Case Study: Talking With Rosa, Eli's Mother

Ms. Kelly chats with Rosa at pickup and dropoff, mentioning things Eli is doing well when she can. She also mentions times when Eli has gotten excited, frustrated, or hit a friend, and different approaches she's tried, but hasn't had time to get into problem-solving. After the incident where Eli accidentally hit Marcus, Ms. Kelly found a little extra time to talk with Rosa. Here are some moments that went well.

1. Set a tone of trust and caring.

Ms. Kelly: "Part of what I wanted to share is that Eli has been doing well in class. Yesterday, when we were building with blocks, Eli made a tower that was pretty high above everyone else's. And then, when Sophia's fell down, and she started crying, he went over and helped her build one just as high."

2. Share your observations about where Eli needs more support and what approaches have been working.

Ms. Kelly: "Earlier today, we were reading a book about whales. I know how much Eli likes the sea, and he was getting pretty excited. He couldn't see as well as he wanted, so he tried to get his friend to move. We've noticed when Eli has big feelings he has a hard time controlling his body, so he ended up accidentally hitting his friend."

3. Learn about Eli's behavior at home and what Rosa does in response.

Ms. Kelly: "I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me. As much as Ms. Zoe and I try to get to know Eli, we're never going to be able to understand him the way you do. Could you tell me a little about what Eli's like when he's with you, at home?"

4. Collaborate on a plan.

Ms. Kelly: "It sounds like the reward system you have in place at home helps Eli, which makes it easier for him to be aware of how he's feeling, and what he can do with his body."
Rosa: "That could work. Eli tends to like that... when we tell him he's doing a good job. Maybe I could take him out for ice cream at the end of the week, or something."

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Case Study: Talking with Leroy, Sophia's Grandfather

Sophia is three. When Sophia gets dropped off, she usually smiles and runs to join her friends. But in the last few weeks, Ms. Kelly noticed some changes.

- Sophia's mom usually picks her up; but lately, it's been Leroy.
- Since then, Sophia's been coming in whining and hasn't seemed excited by her favorite activities.
- She's been playing with her friends less and throwing tantrums when she doesn't get her way.

This was the first time Ms. Kelly discussed Sophia with Leroy, and it wasn't an easy conversation. Ms. Kelly had to change her approach. She focused more on building a relationship with Leroy and letting him know she wants to work as a team. Here are some ways Ms. Kelly was able to meet the goals of the conversation:

1. Set a tone of trust and caring.

Ms. Kelly: "Sophia has plenty of moments where she's been as curious and excited as usual. Like, just today, she was making a fish, gluing shells to colored paper, and... it came out really well!"

2. Share your observations about where Sophia needs more support and what approaches have been working.

v"Recently I've noticed that Sophia hasn't been quite as interested in playing with her friends. Like, yesterday, a friend of hers wanted to play dress up with her, but Sophia wanted to be alone, and sat off to the side with a book."

3. Learn about Sophia's behavior at home and what Leroy does in response.

Ms. Kelly: "Since you know Sophia better than almost anyone... any thoughts on what we could try in class with her?"

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Leroy was taken aback by this question. He wondered why a teacher wanted his advice: “Isn’t that your job?” Ms. Kelly handled his frustration well: “It is. It’s my job to support her at school. And if you have something that’s helped her at home that I could use when she’s here... I’m open to listening.

Collaborate on a plan.

Ms. Kelly: “Maybe we can find another time soon to brainstorm about how to support Sophia? Or even if you just want to come back and join us for a day to read with her, I’m sure she’d love that.”

Leroy: “Okay... yeah. That might work. I’ll let you know.”

Ms. Kelly knew that partnering and creating a plan, like she’d done with Rosa, wasn’t as possible in this situation. Leroy seemed to need more time to build up trust. Sometimes just starting the conversation and planning to meet again is enough. Ms. Kelly had a chance to learn some really important information about why Sophia might be struggling at school, and now Leroy knows that Ms. Kelly’s in Sophia’s corner.

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Understanding Challenging Behavior

You learned to identify signs that a student might need extra support:

- **Patterns of negative behavior**
- **Changes in behavior**
- **Something that feels off**

Addressing Challenging Behavior

You learned how to manage a disruption and refocus a class without pointing students out:

- **Check in with yourself.**
- **Use neutral words and a neutral tone** so children don't feel they're in trouble.
- **Reinforce the behaviors you want to see**, rather than focusing on what they're doing wrong.
- **Give children choices** of ways to calm down.

After you de-escalate a situation, you learned additional ways to “debrief” with students:

- **Get them to brainstorm or role-play** what they could do next time.
- **Create a safe space or cozy corner** to help children regulate themselves.

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Talking with a Caregiver

You learned some ways to bring up concerns with a caregiver and support the student together:

- **Build trust and set a tone of caring.** Even small chats at drop-off and pick-up can nurture the relationship and can go a long way toward making conversations easier.
- **Check in with yourself and examine your feelings.** This can help you keep your cool and anticipate what might upset them.
- **Start with strengths.** Share examples of what the child is doing well, to show you see the child is more than their difficult moments and that you're on their side.
- **Use neutral and descriptive language** to describe the behavior and the larger pattern.
- **Get the caregiver's perspective.** Ask what they've noticed and what strategies work or them.
- **Collaborate on a plan.** This might include trying some things that work at home or seeing if they want to try something that works at school.

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Next Steps

Your program may have its own protocol for identifying and following up with a child who you are concerned about. Ask these questions to align your next steps with your program's policies.

QUESTIONS

Q. If I'm concerned about a child, what is our school protocol for raising and addressing those concerns internally?

Q. What resources are available to me as a staff member if I'm concerned about a child?

Local Resources

Examples: Resource and Referral Agencies/Children's Crisis Treatment Centers/Parent Networks

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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When you show caregivers you want to work with them to support their child, you gain a partner. After sharing your observations and concerns, ask these questions to help create an action plan together.

QUESTIONS

Q. What strategies seem to be working at school? How can these strategies be useful to the caregiver?

Q. What strategies seem to be working at home? How can these be adopted in school?

Q. What are some ideas for next steps if concerns continue?
