

Conflict Escalates

This activity explores how conflicts escalate or worsen and explores some of the causes of escalation.

What to Know

Conflicts can easily escalate because of the way our brains work. When a stressful situation occurs, our amygdala, the part of the brain that integrates emotions, emotional behavior and motivation, can become “hijacked”—that is, it can respond not just irrationally, but destructively. Our more rational, thinking brain takes a back seat during these highly emotionally charged moments, causing us to say or do things that are not conducive to resolving a conflict. Instead we might even worsen it. This is what many people call the fight or flight response.

We call this escalation a ride on the “conflict escalator,” because while escalators are faster than stairs, they do not go immediately up to the top like an elevator. There are incremental steps of escalation, which, if properly understood, can help us bring ourselves back down the emotional escalator to a place where our more rational brain can problem solve. The goal of understanding how conflict escalates and understanding what we can do to de-escalate conflict is to give ourselves a chance to resolve conflict without hurting each other. By giving young people a chance to practice this skill in a safe setting, they will gain skills of emotional regulation and intelligence that will serve them later during an actual conflict.

Objectives

Participants will:

1. be able to identify what people do that increases the level of conflict; and,
2. be able to identify conflict escalation triggers.

Common Core Standard Alignment

- Anchor Standards for Literacy: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7 - Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 - Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2 - Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3-Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
- Anchor Standards for Language-Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.5- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.6-Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Preparation and Materials

- Signal bell or other way to note beginning and end times
- Copies of the "The Backpack Conflict" scenario for each pair
- One sheet of chart paper for each pair or group
- Markers, scissors, tape or glue

Gather Together/Warm Up/Bell Ringer: Paired share (5 minutes)

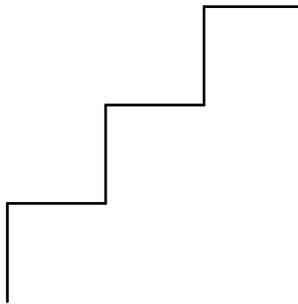
In pairs, have students take turns sharing: *"Think of a time, recently or a while back, when you or a friend or someone in your family had a conflict or a disagreement that kept getting worse and worse."*

Ask for a few volunteers to share their example with the larger group.

"Today we're going to look at a conflict and analyze how and why conflicts sometimes get worse and worse."

Explain: Conflict Escalates (5 minutes)

Ask the children to describe an escalator. If they are unfamiliar with escalators, explain that an escalator is a set of stairs that moves either up or down. Draw the following escalator on the board.



Explain that when a conflict gets worse we say that it escalates. Put the definition of escalate on the board ("to become or cause to become more intense or serious") and mark at the bottom of your escalator "You're just a little upset" and at the top of the escalator mark "You're VERY ANGRY.")

Give the following mini-lecture:

"Usually a conflict gets worse step by step. A conflict might begin when someone says or does something that makes you a little upset. And then you might say something back (now that you're upset) that makes the other person even more upset. Before you know it, both of you are very angry. Sometimes being in a conflict can feel like taking a ride on an escalator—once it starts, you're on your way to the top. Fortunately, understanding better what makes conflict

escalate can help you stop the escalator—before both of you are very angry and do or say something you might later regret.”

Main Activity: The Backpack Conflict (20 minutes)

Take a feelings temperature of the group before you begin the main activity.

Read the following story:

While Danielle was getting her snack out of the coat closet, her backpack accidentally fell and clunked Giorgio on the head. “Ow!” said Giorgio, rubbing his head. “You should be careful, stupid.”

Danielle felt bad about hitting Giorgio, but she didn’t like being called stupid. It was an accident! “Don’t be such a baby. You shouldn’t get in the way,” said Danielle.

Giorgio felt himself getting really angry. As Danielle bent over to pick up her backpack, Giorgio kicked it into the classroom.

Mr. Avazian, their teacher, came back to the coat closet. “What’s all this shouting about?” he asked. Danielle and Giorgio pointed at each other. “He/she started it!” they both said.

Process: *“How might this skit help us understand the conflict escalator?”*

Now ask two volunteer students in pairs to perform the Backpack skit.

Divide children into cooperative groups of two or three and give each group a copy of the handout, “The Backpack Conflict,” a piece of chart paper, some paste, scissors, and crayons.

Have them cut “The Backpack Conflict” items into strips.

Have the children draw an escalator with four steps on the chart paper. As you read the story one more time, have the children place the appropriate statements from the “Backpack Conflict” handout on the chart paper, identifying each step where the conflict escalated.

When children have finished, discuss how the conflict escalated:

- ✓ What was the first thing that happened in this conflict?
- ✓ What did you place at the top of your escalator?
- ✓ What things did the children do that made this conflict worse?
- ✓ What could the characters in the role-play have done differently so that the conflict would not have escalated? How do you imagine they solved their problem?

As a group explore the things (in general) that we do or say that might escalate a conflict. Chart the answers. Be sure to include some of the following: insults, name-calling, blaming, statements like “You always” or “You never,” dredging up things from the past, physical confrontation, etc.

Closing: Escalator Pantomime (5 minutes)

Ask students to stand and walk around the room silently (with no physical touching and no running) for one minute. The first time walking around they will use their bodies to show what escalating conflict looks like. The second time they will show what de-escalating conflict looks like.

Process: *What are some signs we can see in others to know if a conflict might be escalating? What are some signs we can see in ourselves? What are some signs we can see that conflict is de-escalating in others?"*

Have students form a circle and take three deep breaths before ending the session.

Grade Level Modifications

K-1

Instead of being split into pairs to act out the skit, split the class into two groups. One group will be Danielle and one will be Giorgio. Take a feelings temperature of the class. Then in unison, have all the Danielles say their lines and all the Giorgios say theirs. Take another feelings temperature. Use the processing questions for grades 2-5.

For the conflict mapping part of the lesson, draw an escalator on the board and together as a whole class identify places where the conflict escalated. Follow the instructions for grades 2-5 for the rest of the activity.

Grades 6-12 and Adult

Read the Backpack Conflict to the participants, but instead of using that script for the activity, have participants work in pairs to write their own script. Caution everyone that they should not use real names or easily identifiable conflicts in their own scripts. These scripts should be fiction.

Curricular Connections

K-1 Literacy and Art

The conflict escalator technique can be used to map out the conflicts in any number of children's books. A few good ones are: [Matthew and Tilly](#) by Rebecca C. Jones, [The Quarreling Book](#) by Charlotte Zolotow, and [It's Mine](#) by Leo Lionni. Students can use puppets to act out the way conflicts are resolved.

K-1 Art: Have students use watercolor paints to express the mood of the characters in the stories.

K-1 Literacy and Art: Have students record times when they have been able to "come down the escalator." They can draw a picture and write or dictate a caption. Students could be given their own "Coming Down the Escalator" journal. Journals can be shared and celebrated at class meetings.

K-5 Literacy and Music: Have students write silly songs or raps in groups about the conflict escalator. Add some percussion instruments. Encourage students to share and perform their songs.

2-12 Literacy and Drama: Students can write their own one-act plays that illustrate a conflict that escalates and deescalates. Partner students to act out one another's plays.

2-12 Literacy and Art: Have students create a display or bulletin board in the classroom that illustrates ways they have resolved a conflict in a positive way. Students can draw pictures of the people involved and write a couple of sentences or create a storyboard or comic strip of the conflict and hang it for others to see.

2-12 Social Studies/History: Use the conflict escalator to show students how conflicts escalate on a large scale. Ask students to create a timeline of points of escalation and de-escalation, while also charting associated feelings of those involved on both sides of the conflict. What themes emerge across conflicts?

Handouts 1 Conflict Escalates

The Backpack Conflict Script Handout

Danielle: (reaches to get her snack out of a coat closet when her backpack accidentally falls and hits Giorgio on the head)

Giorgio: (rubbing his head) Ow! You should be careful, stupid.

Danielle: (feeling bad about hitting Giorgio, but not liking being called stupid) It was an accident! Don't be such a baby. You shouldn't get in the way. (Danielle leans over to pick up her backpack)

Giorgio: (getting really angry now, as Danielle bends over to pick up her backpack, he kicks it)

Mr. Avazarian: What's all the shouting about?

Danielle and Giorgio: (pointing at each other) He/she started it!