

# Conflict Escalation



## CASEL SEL COMPETENCIES

SA Self-Awareness

RS Relationship Skills

## Gathering: When I'm in a Conflict...

Ask students to complete this sentence, “When I’m in a conflict, one thing that makes me feel like it’s getting worse is...”

## Agenda Check

In the Gathering, we talked about conflicts getting worse. When conflict gets worse, we say it escalates. A conflict might begin when someone says or does something that makes you a little upset. And then, because you are upset, you might say something mean that makes the other person get even more upset. 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, having a good understanding of what makes conflict escalate can help you stop the escalator.

As the Agenda shows, we will be exploring the concept of escalation by doing some role-plays. Then, we will discuss some ideas for trying to de-escalate conflicts. The Debriefing will give us an opportunity to discuss how to recognize when conflicts are escalating, and share some ideas about how to handle that. In the Closing, we’ll share what might work for us personally.

## Activity: Back-to-Back Role-Plays

The following format is a way to have everyone role-playing at the same time, which takes away much of the anxiety students may have about performing. There are two things that you might consider before trying it. If students have not yet done role-playing activities, model a role-play, either with another adult, or with a student. This tends to prevent the role-playing from getting silly and shows students that role-plays have a plot and are not a free-for-all. Another helpful recommendation is to establish ground rules. Many teachers provide two: no touching and no bad language. You might also want to mention that participants don’t have to play themselves or someone resembling themselves in these role-plays.

1. After you have established a foundation for role-playing, group students in pairs and ask each pair to stand back-to-back. Designate one person to be A and the other B.

## Workshop Agenda

- Gathering: When I’m in a Conflict...
- Agenda Check
- Activity: Back-to-Back Role-Plays
- Closing: De-Escalators

## Materials

- Workshop agenda, written on the board or on chart paper
- Materials to get students into pairs for role playing, such as numbered cards, puzzle pieces, or postcards

## Learning Outcomes

- Students will identify what makes conflict escalate and de-escalate.
- Students will identify personal escalators.
- Students will share de-escalating techniques and strategies.

## Connections to Standards

### Behavioral Studies

- Understands that the way a person views an incident reflects personal beliefs, experiences, and attitudes

### Health

- Knows how mood changes and strong feelings affect thoughts and behaviors; Understands how one responds to the behavior of others and how one’s behavior may provoke responses in others
- Knows the difference between positive and negative behaviors used in conflict situations

### Working with Others

- Determines the causes of conflicts
- Identifies an explicit strategy to deal with conflict

2. Explain to students that after each scenario is described, you will say: **Lights, Camera, Action!** and the partners should face each other and enact the role-play. When time is up for each role-play, you will say: **Cut! Stand back-to-back**, and read the next scenario. The role-plays will be short, thirty seconds to two minutes.
3. Choose at least three role-plays from the following scenarios:
  - A and B are friends. A is waiting in line at lunchtime. B cuts in line. This happens a lot, and A is not very happy about it.
  - A and B are students who have a class project to work on together. A keeps saying he doesn't have time to work on the project, and B is getting anxious about it's being done on time. B goes to talk to A about working on the project after school today and A has yet another excuse.
  - A borrowed a game from B a week ago, and wants to have it back. B has forgotten it two days in a row, and doesn't think it's a big deal. A decides to ask again today.
  - A and B are long-time friends who spend a lot of time together. Today, B heard that A has been telling everybody something that was supposed to be a secret. B is upset and decides to confront A in the hallway.
4. After performing the three role-plays, have students continue to stand in pairs and ask them to think back silently to each of the scenarios. To help focus their thoughts, discuss the following:
  - What happened that escalated the conflict in the (first, second, etc.) scenario? Think of the interaction between you and your partner – intonation, body language, language, and so on.
  - If the conflict didn't escalate, what happened to de-escalate it? What did you or your partner do or say that kept things from escalating?
5. Ask partners to face each other and spend a few minutes discussing their observations about the questions posed.
6. Invite students to thank their role-playing partners and return to their seats or to a circle.
7. On chart paper, ask students for responses to two columns – one labeled *What Escalates a Conflict?* and the other *What De-Escalates a Conflict?*
8. Ask: **What escalated the conflicts in your role-plays?** Students might name verbal and non-verbal responses. List the responses. One interesting reflection students will begin to make is that escalation is an individual response. What escalates a conflict for one person might not escalate it for another. Explain: **It is helpful to recognize one's own escalators, because these are the ones that can get us into trouble. It can also be helpful to know what other people's escalators might be, if we want to try to avoid making conflict worse.**
9. If students are interested in the discussion, another talking point is to recognize how many escalators are tied to one's culture.

Students will begin to see that some of the “baggage” we take on to the escalator includes assumptions that all cultures see things the same way. What escalates and de-escalates conflicts for one person might not for another because of background and experiences. Knowing that there are cultural differences can also be a useful tool in getting along well with others.

10. Ask: **What de-escalated the conflicts in your role-plays?** Add these to the chart, in the second column. Students can begin to see that they can develop tools to stop conflict from getting out of hand.
11. Remind students that to be a responsible member of a community they must recognize escalation and choose to not escalate. Possible ways to de-escalate might include: changing one’s tone of voice, not getting “in someone’s face,” listening to the person who is upset, saying how one feels without being mean, walking away, and not taking things personally.

## Debriefing

- How can we recognize when conflicts are escalating?
- Are everyone’s escalators the same?
- What are three things we talked about today that can help de-escalate conflicts?

## Closing: De-Escalators

Ask students to think about the side of the chart that listed de-escalators. In a go-round, invite them to share two with the class: one that they already use, and one they might think of trying out.

## Extensions and Infusion Ideas

### Background

If students have not had lessons in previous grades, see Grade 4, Lesson 6 for additional activities on the concept of escalating and de-escalating conflicts.

### Teachable Moments

When students experience conflicts with each other, you can ask them to plot the events that happened and the feelings they experienced on a conflict escalator. This exercise can be effective in helping them to calm down in order to problem solve and can help students understand the consequences of their choices for themselves and others.

*Help students understand the consequences of their choices for themselves and others.*

## Connecting to Literature

(Note: *Some of the levels listed for the books may seem to be intended for lower grades or reading levels. Remind students that readers of all ages appreciate picture books and that the book is related to the lesson.*)

***Why?***, by Nikolai Popov

(New York: North-South Books, 1996) Gr. P-2+

Summary: A book without words shows a conflict between frogs and mice that grows into war.

1. For each step of escalation, explain why that step is senseless.
2. Explain why it is easier to stop the escalation in the beginning rather than later.
3. Write a short paragraph stating the main message of this book.

***The Butter Battle Book***, by Dr. Seuss

(New York: Random House, 1984) Gr. P-2+

Summary: Two countries go to war over which side their bread is buttered on.

1. List the stages of escalation in this story.
  2. Suppose you could send a message to Grandpa and the Zook holding the Big-Boy Boomeroo. What would you say?
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