

INSIGHT | REGULATION

Co-Regulation Before Strategy

Why adult presence does most of the work — and what that requires of the team when a child is at their most dysregulated.

McArthur Early Childhood Education | The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF | Edition 03

When a child is in the peak of escalation, they usually cannot process a long explanation. The adult's speed, body, voice, and pace become part of the safety response. If we rush, talk fast, or react emotionally, the situation accelerates.

The adult resets first

- Pause your body. Lower your shoulders. Slow your voice.
- Move close without rushing.
- Reduce your words. Three sentences maximum.
- Protect the room — move other children away, reduce the audience, remove hazards.

The real-time response sequence

1. Notice the risk early.
2. Protect — block harm, move hazards, create space.
3. Connect — "I can see this is hard. I'm here. We will keep everyone safe."
4. Guide — one safe action, with help.
5. Restore — repair, reconnect, teach the next attempt. After calm.
6. Document — what happened, what helped, what needs to happen next.

WHAT WE DO NOT DO DURING ESCALATION

Argue. Shame. Force an apology. Demand eye contact. Discuss consequences. Correct publicly. Use isolation. Teaching comes after regulation, not during escalation.

Time in and time away

Time in: the adult stays emotionally available — beside, walking, reading quietly. Time away: less stimulation, a quieter area — but supported, not shaming. A cosy corner, a sensory tool, water, a simple job beside the educator. Never a chair facing the wall. Never "come back when you are good."

Calling support is professional judgement

If you feel you need support, calling for it is not a failure. It is professional judgement. The teaching moment comes later, when the child can actually hear what you say.

This article is part of The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF — McArthur's editorial series for the early childhood education sector. For the full whitepaper and webinar replay, visit www.mcarthur.com.au/insights.