Seven Principles for Effective Verbal Intervention
Dealing with individuals who are belligerent, hostile, or noncompliant can be an everyday occurrence for staff members who work in the human services field. Your effective response to this defensive behavior is often the key to avoiding a physical confrontation with an out-of-control individual.

✔ **Remain calm.**
This may be easier said than done, especially when a person under your care is screaming, making threats, or using abusive language. Remember that the verbally escalating person is beginning to lose control. If the person senses that you are also losing control, the situation will probably get worse. Try to keep your cool, even when challenged, insulted, or threatened.

✔ **Isolate the individual.**
Onlookers, especially peers of the verbally escalating person, tend to fuel the fire. They often become cheerleaders, encouraging the individual. In addition, the presence of an audience makes it more difficult for the person to back down, for fear of losing face in front of others.

Try to isolate the person with whom you are verbally intervening. You will be more effective one-on-one than in a group setting.

✔ **Watch your body language.**
As a person becomes increasingly agitated, he will pay less attention to your words and more attention to your body language.

Be aware of your use of space, posture, and gestures. Don’t get too close to the person, and avoid gestures that might seem threatening. Make sure your nonverbal behavior is consistent with your verbal message.

✔ **Keep it simple.**
Be clear and direct in your message. Avoid jargon and complicated choices. A person who is beginning to lose rational control will not be processing information as well as she usually does. Complex messages will increase her anxiety and probably make her behavior more difficult to manage.

✔ **Use reflective questioning.**
Put the person's statements in your own words and then check with him to see if you have understood what he meant. By repeating or reflecting the person's message in the form of a question, you’ll give him an opportunity to clarify that message.

This reflective questioning is also a powerful way to let the person know that you care enough to listen carefully to his words.
Use silence.
Surprisingly, silence is a very effective verbal intervention technique. Silence on your part allows the individual time to clarify her thoughts and restate her message. This often leads to valuable insight and clearer understanding of the true source of the person’s conflict.

Watch your paraverbals.
Paraverbal communication refers to the tone, volume, and cadence (rate and rhythm) of your speech. Many identical statements can have completely opposite meanings, depending on your paraverbals.

For example, the question, “What’s wrong?” could be stated in a caring, supportive way or in an impatient, condescending way. Avoid double messages by making sure that your paraverbal communication is consistent with the words you use.

While there is no guarantee that the person in your charge will not physically act out, following these seven principles will help you reduce the anxiety and defensiveness that often precede dangerous behavior. These preventive measures will help increase the Care, Welfare, Safety, and SecuritySM of everyone in your facility.

About CPI
CPI is the standard-setting provider of behavior management training that equips employees to have an immediate, tangible, and lasting positive impact on the people and organizations they serve. Through a variety of specialized offerings, CPI empowers professionals with a set of practical actions they can apply both in and out of the workplace.

Since 1980, more than six million professionals have participated in CPI’s training programs, and thousands of organizations worldwide have successfully implemented CPI’s safe, nonharmful techniques and developed comprehensive crisis prevention and intervention plans. CPI’s Nonviolent Crisis Intervention® training and the Prepare Training® program focus on prevention and offer proven strategies for safely defusing anxious, hostile, and violent behavior at the earliest possible stage.

CPI offers training both on site and at select locations in more than 150 cities worldwide. Learn more about how CPI educates, empowers, and enriches at crisisprevention.com, or call 800.558.8976.