

# Emotional and behavioral de-escalation: Tips for teachers

## Behavior is communication.

A student's dysregulation often reflects an unmet need, not an intentional choice to misbehave. A calm presence can help regulate their nervous system. Below are a few tips and considerations to help teachers bring a feeling of safety to students who are having a challenging moment.

## Check in with yourself

- Take a slow breath before responding.
- Keep your voice low, calm and steady.
- Use simple, clear directions.
- Maintain a neutral facial expression and body language.

### Be effective

- ✓ Give the student space when possible.
- ✓ Offer simple choices ("Would you like to work here or take a two-minute break?")
- ✓ Validate emotions without agreeing with inappropriate behavior.
  - "I can see you're really frustrated."
  - "It looks like this is hard right now."
- ✓ Reduce unnecessary talking. Less is often more.
- ✓ Allow processing time after giving directions (5–10 seconds).
- ✓ Redirect privately whenever possible.
- ✓ Focus on safety before problem-solving.

### What to avoid

- ✗ Arguing or engaging in a power struggle.
- ✗ Raising your voice or matching the student's intensity.
- ✗ Publicly embarrassing or shaming the student.
- ✗ Asking "Why did you do that?" in the moment.
- ✗ Making threats or giving multiple commands at once.

## Helpful regulation strategies

- Deep breathing
- Drink of water
- Brief movement break
- Quiet or calming space
- Stress ball or fidget
- Grounding exercise (5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste)
- Drawing or journaling

## Signs a student may be escalating

- Rapid breathing
- Clenched fists or jaw
- Pacing or restlessness
- Crying or withdrawing
- Refusal to engage
- Increased volume or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating or following directions

## After the student is calm

- Reconnect before correcting.
- Briefly discuss what happened.
- Identify triggers and coping strategies.
- Practice or role-play a better response for next time.
- End with encouragement and reinforce the student's ability to recover.

**A helpful reminder:** Students learn best when they feel safe, seen and supported.