

What to Say When Someone Is Escalating

A live-response phrase card for youth-serving professionals

Your words can lower the temperature - or raise it.

When someone is escalating, your first job is not to win the argument, teach the lesson, or force compliance. Reduce threat, protect safety, and create enough space for thinking to return.

1. LOWER THE LOAD

TRY

"I can see this is a lot right now."

TRY

"You do not have to solve everything this second."

TRY

"Let's make this smaller. What is the next thing you need?"

AVOID

"Calm down."

AVOID

Rapid questions, long explanations, public correction.

2. OFFER CONTROL

TRY

"Would you rather sit here or step outside with me?"

TRY

"You can answer now, or I can give you a minute."

TRY

"Here are two options that are both okay."

AVOID

Power struggles disguised as choices.

AVOID

Threatening consequences while the person is highly activated.

3. HOLD THE BOUNDARY

TRY

"I am going to stay with you, and I cannot let anyone get hurt."

TRY

"It is okay to be angry. It is not okay to hit."

TRY

"We can talk about what happened after we are both steadier."

AVOID

Shaming, sarcasm, arguing facts, or matching intensity.

AVOID

Demanding insight or apology in the middle of escalation.

The 5-second check before you speak

LOWER

Is my voice slower and quieter than theirs?

SHORTEN

Can I say this in one sentence?

CHOICE

Can I offer one safe choice?

SPACE

Am I crowding, cornering, or performing for an audience?

AFTER REGULATION RETURNS

Then teach, repair, problem-solve, set consequences, or revisit expectations. Regulation is not the absence of accountability; it creates the conditions where accountability can actually work.

SAFETY NOTE

If there is an immediate risk of harm, follow your organization's crisis and emergency procedures. This guide supports communication; it does not replace required safety protocols or clinical judgment.

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