
3 Phrases to De-escalate a Student

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Introduction

In every classroom, emotions can run high. Even the best of us will have moments where we're not sure what to say next. If you've ever faced an angry or defiant student and felt your heart race and your mind go blank, you're not alone.

The good news is that de-escalation doesn't begin with control - it begins with connection. This is because attempts to control are often met with psychological reactance, often making the situation worse.

The three phrases in this guide will help you calm emotions, rebuild safety, and restore trust, one conversation at a time.

Phrase #1: Name the Emotion + Offer Support

➡ *Example: "I can see you're upset. I'm here to help."*

When students feel truly seen and supported, their nervous systems begin to settle. Your calm presence communicates, *"You're safe with me."*

By showing that strong emotions don't push you away, you model emotional stability and trustworthiness - two things many students with behavioral challenges rarely experience from adults.

This simple moment of empathy tells them you care more about connection than control. Over time, that consistency strengthens your relationship and opens students up to your influence. What begins as a small act of understanding can transform the entire classroom climate into one of calm, safety, and belonging.

Phrase #2: Express Intent to Understand + Invite Sharing

➡ *Example: "I want to understand what's going on. Can you tell me?"*

This phrase reminds students that their voice, experience, and perspective matter. It shows them that you're not just there to correct their behavior, you're there to understand it.

When students sense genuine curiosity instead of judgment, defensiveness fades and trust begins to grow. What might have turned into a power struggle becomes a moment of connection and partnership.

Over time, students who feel heard are more willing to accept redirection, reflect on their choices, and try again. Listening doesn't remove accountability - it creates the safety students need to learn from mistakes and build better habits.

Phrase #3: Collaborative Language + Problem-Solving Invitation

➡ Example: *“Let’s figure this out together.”*

This phrase shifts the tone from *me versus you* to *us versus the problem*. It communicates that you see the student as capable, valuable, and worth collaborating with.

Students feel like our teammates rather than just the targets of our disapproval. As a result, their resistance will begin to soften, and solutions will become possible. It also sends a powerful message: *“I respect you enough to work through this issue together.”* That sense of shared ownership transforms conflict into connection and growth.

As students experience your steady belief in them, they begin to rise to the positive vision you hold. Partnership builds accountability - and that’s where real behavioral change begins.

Conclusion

Empathy is the strongest de-escalation tool we have because it helps us truly understand our students and the emotions driving their behavior. When we take the time to see beneath the surface, we discover what they need most - safety, belonging, and connection.

That understanding allows us to design supports and interventions that meet students where they are and guide them toward growth.

Each moment of calm connection models the emotional regulation we hope to teach. And when we choose connection over correction and clarity over control, we create classrooms where trust replaces fear and behavioral transformation begins.