

De-Escalation Strategies for Law Enforcement in Schools

School Resource Officers and law enforcement personnel are regularly exposed to challenging situations, high emotions, and the responsibility of keeping students safe. When we are stressed, or emotionally exhausted, it becomes more difficult to remain calm, think clearly, and respond effectively.

Before supporting a student in distress, take a moment to check in with yourself to prioritize your own well-being.

Before You Engage - Regulate

Students often mirror the emotional tone of adults around them.

- Take a breath and remain calm.
- Lower your voice and slow your pace.
- Approach with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Remember that distress may look like defiance.

NOTICE: Supporting Students in Distress

Students experiencing emotional distress, may struggle to regulate their emotions, communicate effectively, or respond to authority figures. School Resource Officers and law enforcement personnel can play a critical role in reducing escalation and creating a sense of safety.

Consider the Environment

- When possible, reduce the audience and remove the student from the group of bystanders
- Avoid surrounding or crowding the student.
- Attempt to minimize loud noises and distractions.
- Offer choices whenever possible.
- Break requests into small steps.
- Allow time for responses.

(Note: Law Enforcement Officers should always first be guided by their departmental policies, procedures as well as state statute and federal guidelines)



TALK: Communication Strategies

A calm, supportive approach helps reduce stress and create a sense of safety for students in distress. Speak slowly, use simple language, allow time for responses, and use a motivational interviewing technique such as **OARS (Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, and Summaries)** to build trust, reduce defensiveness, and encourage meaningful conversation.

O - Open-Ended Questions	A - Affirmations
Ask questions that invite students to share. • “Can you tell me what happened?” • “What do you need right now?”	Acknowledge feelings without judging behavior. • “I can see you’re upset.” • “This seems really difficult.”
R - Reflections	S - Summaries
Reflect what you hear and avoid power struggles. • “Let’s take this one step at a time.” • “Take a minute. We can talk when you’re ready.”	Briefly recap what you’ve heard to show understanding and identify next steps • “It sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed and need a few minutes to calm down.” • “What I’m hearing is that you’re frustrated about what happened in class.”

ACT: Take Appropriate and Supportive Action with these De-escalation Strategies

When you identify a student experiencing a distressing situation, your goal is to help create safety and support emotional regulation. These techniques can be used in most settings, although a quiet and calm environment is often most effective.

These evidence-informed strategies can help students regulate intense emotions and reduce physiological arousal.

Box Breathing

Box breathing is a simple grounding technique that helps slow the heart rate and reduce feelings of stress and anxiety.

Ask the student to focus on their breathing and imagine tracing the sides of a box.

1. **Exhale** slowly through the mouth.
2. **Inhale** through the nose for a count of four.
3. **Hold** the breath for a count of four.
4. **Exhale** through the mouth for a count of four.
5. **Hold** again for a count of four.

Repeat several times until breathing begins to slow.

Try saying: “Let’s take a few breaths together.”

Intense Exercise

Brief physical activity can help release built-up energy and stress.

Examples:

- 20 jumping jacks
- A brisk walk
- Climbing stairs
- Stretching exercises

Movement can help students regain a sense of control and focus.

Note – So long as the movement does not pose additional risks to the student, other students, staff of the law enforcement officer.

Temperature

Help the student lower the temperature of their face.

Examples:

- Offer a cold pack.
- Offer an ice cube wrapped in a paper towel.
- Encourage the student to hold the cold item against their face for 20–30 seconds.

This can help slow the heart rate and interrupt escalating emotional responses.

Paired Muscle Relaxation

Ask the student to:

1. Take a deep breath in.
2. Tighten a muscle group (hands, shoulders, legs, feet, etc.) for 5–6 seconds.
3. Slowly exhale and release the tension.
4. Think of the word “**relax**” while releasing the muscles.

Repeat with different muscle groups.

Additional In-the-Moment Strategies

- ▶ Offer water.
- ▶ Encourage the student to sit down.
- ▶ Reduce noise and distractions.
- ▶ Move to a quieter location when possible.
- ▶ Allow time and silence without pressure to talk.
- ▶ Offer simple choices to help the student regain a sense of control.

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