

De-Escalation Desk Guide

De-Escalation is not about being passive. It is about maintaining control of interactions without increasing danger. Abusive individuals may use anger, charm, intimidation, or victimhood strategically. Escalation often occurs when control feels threatened. The goal is safety, not dominance.

Maintaining Calm Presence

- Slow breaths before responding
- Lower vocal tone
- Reduce body tension
- Maintain a neutral expression

Tone Modulation and Pacing

Example: Instead of “You can’t talk to me like that.” **Use:** “I’m going to continue this conversation when we can speak respectfully.”

Non-Confrontational Language

Shift the conversation from a personal challenge to procedural clarity.

Avoid: “Calm down”; “You’re being aggressive”; “That’s not true”

Use: “I want to make sure I understand your concern.” “Let’s focus on the steps required.” “Here’s what the policy requires.”

Strategic Pauses

Strategic pauses can help disrupt escalation rhythms and give people a moment to think and decide before acting.

Skills:

- Pause after emotional statements
- Avoid filling space with justification
- Let hostility dissipate

Boundary-Setting Statements

Examples:

“I will not continue this conversation if threats are made.”

“We can discuss the case but not personal attacks.”

“I am here to explain the process.”

Structured Communication Techniques

Individuals may escalate a conversation when they feel a loss of control.
Clear procedural explanations reduce perceived threat.

Use Structure

- What is happening?
- Why is it happening?
- What options exist?
- What happens next?

Predictability lowers volatility.

Transparency to Reduce Perceived Threat

Avoid vague statements like:
“We’re taking action.”

Instead: “You will receive written notice within 10 days. It will explain your appeal rights.”

Separating Emotion from Policy

When confronted with anger.

Instead of: “You shouldn’t be upset.”

Use: “This can feel frustrating for many people. Let me tell you about the policy, next steps, and your options.”

Redirecting to Process and Accountability

When conversation shifts to blaming the custodial parent, attacking the system, or personal grievances, redirect.

- “Today’s discussion is about your payment obligation.”
- “Our role is to enforce the order that was issued.”

Responding to Manipulation

Domestic violence abusers often manipulate their partners through use of fear, guilt, pressure, or exploitation to gain and maintain control. This can include: passive-aggressive behavior, lying, blaming, isolation, and threats.

Avoiding Collusion

Collusion sounds like: “Yeah, that’s unfair.”
Or “I get why you’re mad at her.”

Instead try: “My role is to enforce the court’s order.” Or, “The payment obligation comes from the court order.”

Do not validate harmful narratives, defend the custodial parent, or get pulled into an argument vortex.

Staying Focused on Behavior and Obligations

Abusers may try to “get you on their side” by changing the narrative and blaming the survivor. Facts reduce argument. Shift to action.

Instead of: “You’re being irresponsible.”

Use: “Payments have not been received for three months.”

Handling Emotional Outbursts Safely

State a boundary and offer choice being careful to not raise your tone. Emphasize that respect for child support staff and the other parent is expected.

Try statements like:

“We can continue this call without the yelling or we can reschedule when you’re ready to discuss the case without yelling at me.”

Handling Threats

If threats occur:

- Prioritize safety, follow protocols
- End contact
- Document immediately

Maintaining Authority Without Escalation

Authority comes from predictability. Inconsistency invites power struggle. If you say you will end the call, end it.

Using Policy as Anchor

Policy reduces personalization and becomes the external authority.

Use phrases like:

- “The statute requires...”
- “Federal guidelines mandate...”
- “Agency policy requires...”

Staying Focused on Behavior and Obligations

Power struggle indicators include:

- Arguing over tone
- Defending personal credibility
- Responding emotionally

If you notice these:

- Repeat process
- Repeat options
- Repeat consequences

Knowing When to Disengage

Disengage when:

- Threats escalate
- Manipulation intensifies
- Conversation becomes circular
- Staff feel disregulated

**Have questions
or want more training?**



Contact the SAVES Center at
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Or visit the SAVES Center website at
savescenter.org