

# Responding to Dysregulation: Low-Level to High Level

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Start at the top and work your way down. Skip items that aren't a good match for the person you support or that won't work in a specific situation. Keep going until you see the person is starting to regulate back to the **Green Pathway**. Please consult with members of the team (e.g. a mental health professional) to help individualize a response to escalation that will work best for the person you support.

## Low-Level Escalations:

- Stop. Breathe. Think about your brain.
- Resist impulsively answering
- There is *something* wrong, even if it *feels* like they could “just stop”
- Be **curious** about what is happening
- Focus on *soothing* first:
  - Slow things down
  - Adjust expectations
  - Provide comfort/affection/connection
  - Avoid overloading with too many words
- Have short phrases ready:
  - **“I need a minute to think”** – this slows things down, avoids back-and-forths, and avoids telling them what to do.
  - **“I’m here to help you”** or **“We can work this out”** – this helps them understand we are focused on helping
  - **“That wasn’t what you expected.”** – this helps them understand that you see there is a problem, but avoids giving immediate directions or suggestions for their brain to process
  - **“I believe you.”** – this might help them understand that you are on the same page as them, avoids giving immediate directions/suggestions to process.
  - **“Oh no! I can help you with that.”** (Matching energy slightly, quickly followed by a regulated statement) – this tells their brain that you notice what is going on, how it makes them feel, and that you are there to help.
    - You only want to “match energy” like this in *low* levels of escalation, and only when you are actually regulated.
    - This is typically how we talk to “little kids”, so as they get older you may need to adjust or stop this strategy.

- Don't immediately correct rude or intense demands, statements, or requests.
- Instead, say yes (if the answer is yes), and then see if there is an opportunity for you to gently address any issues later.
  - Robyn Gobbel suggests **during low levels of escalation** possibly saying something like, "Yes I can get you a snack. While I get up, could you ask me nicely?"
    - They may refuse to do this in the moment—accept it. The goal is to stay regulated in these lower-level escalations.
- If there is a power-struggle, or if the answer is no, be willing to compromise if it will help their go back to the **Green Pathway**.
- Consider if their brain is seeking **autonomy**. If so, how can you give them more choices and avoid additional demands?
- Use soft facial expressions and body language to show them that you support them.
- From Robyn Gobbel: Consider their physical and sensory needs:
  - Drinks (hot, cold, thick, sweet)
  - Snacks (chewy, crunchy, sour, sucking)
  - Movement (jump, run, wiggle, upside down)
  - Water (bath/shower, swimming, sprinkler, drinks)
  - Big body activities such as "arm wrestling, running around the house, pillow fight, [or a] dance party." (Robyn Gobbel)
  - Cooking and baking
  - Sensory play like finger painting or shaving cream. (Gobbel)
- Consider the physical environment:
  - Turn off devices that are making noises
  - Ask people (especially if they are making noise) who are making noise to leave
  - Remove any potentially-dangerous items from the area
    - Do this in a non-frantic way
- If none of these work, stay quiet for a few minutes to see if this helps with regulation.
- If needed, gently suggest that they take some space/take a break in their bedroom or another appropriate and safe location
- Be OK with adjusting your original expectations if it helps **you** stay regulated, to move on, or to keep them regulated.

### **When Others (e.g. Siblings) Are Involved (Low Level)**

- Gently say, “Let’s all pause.” Consider having everyone take a deep breath.
- Encourage both siblings to think about a way forward/compromise/alternative
- If needed, suggest that siblings take a break
- Give them time to think (encourage them to think before answering)
- Facilitate a “deal” between the siblings, if needed. If they cannot do so on their own, you can gently give your ideas or a new plan to move forward.

*Note: these will only work when both siblings are in low levels of escalation.*

### **High Level Escalations**

- Avoid immediate responses!
  - Be **curious** about what is happening—this helps us with our own regulation
- Say, “I want to help you” or “We can work through this together” and then be quiet.
- If you sense their brain feels unsafe, clearly state “I am safe”, “You are safe,” “You are not in trouble,” or “I’m not going to hurt you”
  - Give distance and show safety with your body.
  - Sit low if you can
  - If you have to move around, move slowly
- If possible, give distance.
  - This might mean in a separate room or in the same area, depending on safety needs.
- Keep the environment safe. Calmly ask others to leave the area
- Consider physical and sensory needs
  - Drinks (hot, cold, thick, sweet)
  - Snacks (chewy, crunchy, sour, sucking)
  - Movement (jump, run, wiggle, upside down)
  - Water (bath/shower, swimming, sprinkler, drinks)

### **When Others (e.g. Siblings) Are Involved (High Level)**

- Suggest that everyone take a break. They may need your help in transitioning to another activity for a while.
- If needed (and safe), step between siblings to ensure you have their attention and that they can hear what you are suggesting.

- After everyone is regulated, help everyone come up with a plan to move forward. (This may be trying the activity again, trying a different activity, or doing separate activities for a while.)

## When “Nothing Works”

- Respond to every **3<sup>rd</sup> statement** if person is oppositional and not allowing disengagement.
- Say, “**I need a minute to think**” or “**I’m following the plan**” to try and buy time.
- Model (& achieve!) regulation by **taking time to think** and **taking a breath** before saying anything.

## De-Escalation and Returning to the Green Pathway

- Look for signals that they are starting to regulate back to the Green Pathway.
  - Less anger
  - Wanting more interaction after not wanting it
  - Seeking comfort
  - Showing flexibility
- Wait until you are able to move forward or help them think through the immediate issue. If needed, make a plan/agreement on how to move forward with the day.
- Every time dysregulation occurs, there is an opportunity for us to **model** regulation through these strategies.

Learn more from Nate Sheets at [www.cogsupports.com](http://www.cogsupports.com)

Nate’s book: “Essential FASD Supports”

Robyn Gobbel’s book: “Raising Kids with Big Baffling Behaviors”

Dr. Mona Delahooke’s books: “Beyond Behaviors” and “Brain-Body Parenting”