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Have you ever found yourself in a verbal confrontation with a student, and before you know it, you are knee deep in a verbal power struggle? We all have!

I have framed up my top tips for de-escalating a verbal power struggle with the acronym “DROP THE ROPE”. It can be helpful to envision the verbal confrontation as a tug of war, and rather than giving the opposing person resistance which will likely result in even harder tugging, try “dropping the rope with the following strategies!

P.S. This works with adults too. 😊

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DROP THE ROPE:

Decide whether it is a battle worth fighting. We don't have to accept an invitation to every conflict. At times, students may say something provocative and it is okay to decide not to “take the bait”.

Redirect the student's attention to a different topic of conversation or an activity, especially one that is preferred, or of interest to the student.

Offer Assistance if the verbal confrontation seems related to a frustration, problem or difficulty the student is experiencing. Present yourself as a helper.

Paraphrase what the student said in order to show the student he/she has been heard. Paraphrasing or reflecting what you heard does not mean you agree with or condone it, but simply that you heard it.

Tone of Voice is part of the 90% of our communication that is non-verbal. A person

understands our true meaning by non-verbals such as body language, facial expression and tone of voice. Actively work to maintain a pleasant, conversational tone and eliminate signs of sarcasm, exasperation and irritation.

Humor can help redirect even a very upset person. It is important that the humor not be about the student or construed to be laughing at them. Sometimes making a self-deprecating joke or a totally off-topic joke can remove tension and change the momentum.

Emotional Equilibrium is important because it is common for our emotions to almost seem contagious! When we are around someone who is calm and cool, we have a tendency to feel that way too. Similarly, when we are around someone who is tense or angry, we also mirror those feelings more quickly. Practicing deep breathing, positive thinking and other strategies for maintaining your own emotional equilibrium will likely help the student regain it as well.

Reframe the issue by presenting a positive solution or identifying areas of agreement.

Offer Options Avoid ultimatums, and instead offer choices. When a couple of acceptable options are presented, it allows the student to save face while still ending the conflict.

Privacy can be helpful in avoiding the student “performing” or trying to save face in front of an audience.

End the conversation and direct your attention to something else by saying, “We can discuss this later,” or “We will have to agree to disagree for now.”

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