

Angry and Aggressive Students

Knowing how to prevent and respond to student anger and aggression is important to maintaining order in school.

By Jim Larson

Monday had a bad feel to it. A hallway fracas before first period resulted in two students being detained in the office. An innocent onlooker received a nasty bump on the head, and her upset parent was on the way to the school. Despite increased supervision in the hallways during class transitions, by first lunch the administrative team had responded to an inordinate number of anger-fueled incidents. They knew something was brewing, and they were correct.

The melee started in the lunchroom. As staff members rushed to break up a full-blown fistfight, another fight broke out across the room. Bystanders screamed and climbed onto tables for better vantage points. By the time staff members and local police officers had the situation under control, nine individuals had been arrested, including three outside adults who had been summoned by students using their cell phones.

Fighting in School

Students who engage in physical aggression in school present a serious challenge to maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment. Unlike many other forms of student aggression, fighting is explicit, is violent, and demands attention. A fight between students in a classroom, a hallway, or the lunchroom brings every other activity to a halt and draws fellow students and concerned adults toward the violence. The disruption is total, the after-effects lingering, and the potential for serious injury very real.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2006, 36% of students in grades 9 through 12 reported that they had been in a physical fight in the last 12 months, and 14% reported that they had fought on school property (NCES, 2007).

Although male students were more likely to have been in a fight, 28% of female students reported that they had been in a physical fight in the past year, and 9% of this fighting took place on school property, an increase from the previous survey. Students are not the only ones to face the problem of physical violence in school: in 2006, 4% of teachers in central city schools and 3% in suburban and rural schools were physically attacked by students.

Those troubling statistics exist in the context of generally decreasing school violence. Although the number of homicides and weapon-carrying incidents in schools has declined over the past decade, the prevalence of non-lethal assaults has remained fairly stable or, in the case of girls, risen since the mid-1990s. Why is it that some students persist in aggressive behavior at school, even in the face of serious disciplinary consequences and possible criminal arrest? The answer requires understanding the nature and function of adolescent aggression.

Types of Aggression

The work of Kenneth Dodge and colleagues (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1991; Dodge, Bates, & Petit, 1994) has identified two broad types of childhood and adolescent aggression: proactive and reactive. Students who engage in proactive aggression initiate aggressive behavior to obtain some goal or outcome. Conversely, students who engage in reactive aggression are responding to perceived threats around them. Both forms can involve serious physical violence, but the purpose behind the violence is quite different.

Although most aggression is not purely proactive or reactive, administrators should be able to recognize the predominant features of each type because the intervention and disciplinary approaches vary sharply. Proactive

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aggression is typically reasoned, unemotional, and focused on acquiring some goal. For example, a bully wants peer approval and victim submission, and gang members want status and control.

In contrast, reactive aggression is frequently highly emotional and is often the result of biased or deficient cognitive processing on the part of the student. Highly reactive aggressive students tend to misperceive bumps, looks, and other interactions as hostile. In addition, these students often have deficient problem-solving skills. This attribute is most evident when an administrator asks a student, “What else could you have done other than hit him?” and in response receives a blank look and a shrug. Students who have emotional disabilities or who lack the cognitive ability of their typical peers are at higher risk for displaying reactive aggression, particularly when they are already frustrated by academic and social failure.

Girls are much more likely than boys to use relational aggression techniques—social exclusion, gossip, and peer rejection. These forms of aggression can be vicious and create circumstances that increase the potential for physical aggression. Girls who employ high levels of relational aggression in elementary school are more likely to resort to physical aggression in secondary school (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders, 2000). In addition, girls who have been physically or sexually abused at home are at increased risk for physically aggressive behavior both in and out of school (Pepler & Sedighdeilami, 1998).

The vast majority of students in middle level and high school never engage in serious physical aggression. A substantial and fortunate percentage never even witnesses a fistfight in school. But the disruption that accompanies

De-escalation

Confronting an angry, potentially aggressive student can increase or decrease the potential for problems. Develop de-escalation procedures, such as the following, with your staff members and practice them through role-play:

- Reduce the student’s potential to engage in face-saving aggression by removing any peer spectators.
- Take a nonthreatening stance with your body at an angle to the student and your empty hands at your sides in plain sight. A walkie-talkie can look weaponlike in the hand of a staff member and may seem threatening to an emotionally upset student.
- Maintain a calm demeanor and steady, level voice, even in the face of intense verbal disrespect or threats from the student.
- Acknowledge the student’s emotional condition empathetically—for example, “You’re really angry, and I want to understand why.”
- Control the interaction by setting limits—such as, “I want you to sit down before we continue” or “We can talk, but only if you stop swearing.”
- Provide problem-solving counseling with a school psychologist or counselor at the earliest opportunity.

serious physical aggression is so antithetical to the learning environment that even a few incidents demand attention.

Implications for Administrators

To reduce the frequency of interpersonal aggression, take a whole-school approach. This approach recognizes that everyone in the building, staff members and students alike, contributes to an environment that either increases or decreases the likelihood of student aggression and involves prevention efforts that address the needs of everyone. The objective is to create an environment that decreases the likelihood of aggressive behavior while increasing the opportunities for learning socially desirable conflict resolution and anger management strategies. The whole-school approach uses universal supports for everyone, selected supports for higher-risk students, and indicated supports for students with severe and pervasive problems with anger and aggression.

Universal Supports

The majority (60%–80%) of secondary school students are behaviorally skilled, nonaggressive, and academically goal oriented. These students attend school regularly, complete

Resources

Conflict-Resolution

Teenage Health Teaching Modules has published two curricula: *Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders: Thinking and Acting to Prevent Violence* (Slaby, Wilson-Brewer, & Dash, 1994; grades 6–8) and *Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents* (Prothrow-Stith, 1987; Grades 9–10).
www.thtm.org/index.htm

Disciplinary Data

The School Wide Information System is a Web-based office referral organization and monitoring system to help school personnel use referral data to develop student interventions.
www.swis.org/index.php

Skills Training

Two promising programs are *Aggression Replacement Training* (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998; published by Research Press, www.researchpress.com) and *Think First: Addressing Aggressive Behavior in Secondary Schools* (Larson, 2005; published by Guilford Press, www.guilfordpress.com).

De-escalation Training

The Crisis Prevention Institute specializes in training school staff members to manage students who engage in disruptive or assaultive behaviors.
www.crisisprevention.com

their requirements, and progress at the expected pace. This group plays a significant role in mediating the level of aggressive behavior in school through their willingness and ability to adhere to school rules and routines. Implementing effective schoolwide and classroom rules, rationally conceived and fairly enforced, will help keep this group as large as it can be. The following strategies may also help:

- Energize the code of conduct. Ensure that the discipline policy specifies the rights and responsibilities of students and staff members, identifies desirable and unacceptable behaviors, and is actively taught to all parties. A well-designed, rigorously enforced code of conduct is the strongest tool for growing the base of nonaggressive, behaviorally skilled students (Larson, 2005).
- Reduce overcrowding. Large numbers of students in limited spaces increase the potential for tempers to flare. Staggered starting times and bell schedules and multiple lunch periods can ameliorate these conditions to some degree. In areas of high student density—such as hallways, common areas, and lunchrooms—keep the ratio of supervisory staff members to students as high as possible.
- Provide a classroom-level conflict resolution curriculum to all students.

Selected Supports

Between 10% and 20% of the students in a normal middle level or high school are behaviorally at risk. Not all of these students are at risk for aggression, but those who are demand attention. Aggression is a comparatively stable behavioral trait, and young people who still use their fists as an anger management or conflict resolution strategy in middle level or high school are at significant risk for serious problems later. For many of those students, the school environment may be the last best hope. Schools can use the following strategies to help support students who display at-risk behavior:

- Communicate with feeder schools. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Aggressive middle level students become aggressive high school students

with impressive consistency. Acquire and use the discipline and intervention data from feeder schools to prepare behavioral supports. It is better to have preventive supports in place and reduce or remove them as necessary than to be forced into a reactive position after an incident.

- Use office disciplinary data to guide interventions. Those data can show administrators the frequency of aggressive behaviors, the locations of problems, the types of aggressive problems, the students involved, and the staff members who are making referrals.
- Provide skills training to chronic fighters. Many frustrated administrators make the mistake of believing that the promise of seriously aversive consequences—such as suspension, citation, and expulsion—will convince a student to control his or her aggressive behavior. It is important to remember that managing excessive anger requires a set of cognitive and behavioral skills that must be systematically learned over time. Consequently, anger management skills training is an important component of an effective schoolwide discipline plan.

Indicated Supports

Students who have severe and pervasive problems with anger and aggression typically make up no more than 3% to 5% of the school population, but they have the potential to occupy a disproportionate percentage of the administrator's time. These strategies can help administrators quickly identify those students and intervene to get them the help they need:

- Students who have identified behavioral challenges, including aggression, should have up-to-date behavior intervention plans (BIPs). These plans should be driven by functional behavioral assessments and describe the scope and substance of classroom and schoolwide positive behavioral supports. The BIP must be communicated to all staff members who routinely interact with the student, and its content should be followed and modified as necessary. Failure to maintain and follow the BIP deprives the student of entitled support and can

leave a school open to legal problems in the event of a serious incident.

- Ensure that teachers are skilled in crisis response. Procedures for clearing rooms and contacting support personnel should be clearly articulated. Many local law enforcement agencies will train school personnel in safe, effective restraint and transportation procedures. School psychologists may help train other staff members in emotional de-escalation techniques.

Charge to Administrators

Keep in mind that most, if not all, of even the most volatile students would rather not get into a fight in school. Students know full well that fighting is a painful endeavor that has serious consequences. When a fight happens, it is often because the students did not have the knowledge or skills to prevent it. Consequently, administrators must create an environment that actively teaches nonviolent problem resolution. This means moving

beyond zero-tolerance rules to a whole-school approach that addresses the needs of all. **PL**

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