



Managing Hostile Students

An increasing cause of workplace injuries for school district employees is being struck or injured by a student. Dealing with aggressive students is challenging and stressful. However, if you are prepared with strategies and training, you can deal with student aggression safely, effectively, and appropriately.

When dealing with student aggression, one's instinct may be to scream, defend, or remove yourself from the situation. However, your first action must be to determine how to de-escalate the situation quickly. Follow these general de-escalation tips:

- Keep yourself calm. Students feed off your emotions. You may inadvertently escalate the situation if you seem tense, through tone or movement.
- Don't threaten or raise your voice.
- Be firm in any audible commands you give to an aggressive student.
- Maintain eye contact when you can but don't impede on their personal space, as getting too close can appear as an aggressive tactic.
- Try to be a barrier between aggressive students if it is safe to do so. Remember to continuously assess the situation.
- Make sure the other students are safe. When dealing with a verbally aggressive student, move other students to the perimeter of the classroom. If a student is physically aggressive, move other students to the hallway or another safe location. Then, have them go across the hall and ask to call for an administrator.
- Once others are out of harm's way, resist the urge to physically stop the student. Don't try to block the student from leaving by standing in the way.

In general, staff that is present during these outbursts should determine what the student is looking for, if a physical confrontation is imminent, or if a breakdown requires specialist intervention. Nevertheless, different aggressive behaviors require different responses.

How do you deal with a verbally aggressive student?

Get them to talk out their feelings. A staff member should prompt them to share their emotions. You can ask probing questions, such as "What are you angry about?" or "Why are you feeling this way?" As students share be sure to verbally acknowledge them, regardless of whether their thoughts are logical. Never make light of a student's situation as it is important to them at that time.



How do you handle a physically aggressive student?

Physical aggression can make an extremely dangerous situation. This type of aggression can result in injury to staff or other students. Always ask for assistance when physical confrontations occur to appropriately manage the threat. One's impulse may be to directly face an angry student while interacting, instead stay to the right or left of them. If the student is standing, sit in a chair near them. If they are sitting, perhaps try sitting on the floor. These are positive ways to indicate that the staff member is not a threat.

Additionally, try to establish boundaries. For example, ask the student to move away from you. Calmly explain to them why their behavior is unacceptable. Continue to listen and acknowledge them as they speak. These actions allow time for administration or other support to reach you. Do not try to physically restrain the student unless you have been specially trained, and it is necessary to protect other students. Waiting for help as calmly as possible is the best option for everyone's safety.

Students who display aggressive and violent behaviors are a source of concern for staff. The practical strategies discussed are effective for managing a hostile student. If you have any questions, reach out to Robert Blaisdell, Director of Loss Control, at rblaisdell@wrightinsurance.com.