

Students in crisis

A GOLD Coast doctor accused of hog-tying a seven-year-old patient says the boy was 'disruptive, violent and out of control' and tying him up was 'a game' to distract him. (<http://www.couriermail.com.au>). The incidence of 'crisis' behaviour in schools is increasing and boarding school staff are sometimes confronted by 'crisis' situations where students may be aggressive and at risk. What are the appropriate ways to respond to student aggression or unsafe behaviour in the boarding residence?

This paper looks at awareness of student needs and risk factors in prevention of aggression, appropriate strategies for de-escalating potentially aggressive behaviour, knowing your residence policy in responding to immediate risk of harm and the possible consequences of inappropriate responses.

Responding to a young person who is in crisis involves:

1. understanding their needs and risk factors
2. developing a prevention plan
3. de-escalating the behaviour
4. resolving the crisis and helping the young person return to more appropriate behaviour,
5. understanding the cause of the crisis and
6. increasing positive coping skills to use in the future.

1. Be aware of the need

Much of the aggressive behaviour displayed by young people is their method of coping with or solving problems in their lives. Many of their responses, however, do not usually help them. For example, young people may engage in aggression to mask their need for



attention, or to avoid embarrassment or shame. When residence personnel can be alert to a student's needs and triggers and assist them in meeting these needs, they become an ally and help de-escalate potentially risky situations.

The indicators of a student's needs, risk factors and triggers may come through:

- a previous school or residence report,
- the student application interview,
- the health section on their application form, or
- a school behaviour or incident report of concern, (of a certain level and type of behaviour)

Any indicators in the application process or later behaviour of possible concern at school or in the residence should trigger a pro-active alert to the residence, that causes a preventative response by a pastoral care team and/or the boarding staff. Ignoring these indicators is often to the detriment of the student and the residence.

2. Prevention plans

An effective student-centred, preventative response is to develop a safety or care plan in conversation with the student. Any hint of a risk of aggression, self-harm or lack of anger management in a student should be taken seriously, and talked through with a residence staff member, student welfare team, or mental health counsellor.

A prevention plan asks the young person to identify:

1. the behaviors or symptoms that put them at risk of aggression or harm,
2. the triggers; those events, situations, people, thoughts or feelings that trigger those behaviors or symptoms,
3. what they can do to respond to the triggers in ways that will keep them safe, or calm them down (a list of coping skills they use or can try),
4. what the staff (and maybe their friends and family) can do to best support them and de-escalate them in those moments of crisis,

5. how they can make a commitment to their own safety plan.

The prevention plan should also;

- clearly state the organisation policies on strategies available if the coping approaches do not work and a crisis situation is entered,
- how regularly the plan should be reviewed and assessed.

Developing a plan will depend on the organisation's capacity to have appropriate staff available, and the severity of the risk.

3. Intervention strategies

Intervention can take many forms. The real test of a person's skill in a crisis situation is their ability to match the appropriate intervention strategy with the young person and their specific needs, while always operating according to their Residence critical incident procedure.

De-escalation

Violent or aggressive behaviour must be calmed to secure the safety of the young person and others around. When someone becomes aggressive, either due to anger, stress or any overwhelming emotion, it is important to de-escalate them until they are no longer a danger to anyone. Using suitable, cautious and safe techniques can keep you and others safe.

- If other young people are in the vicinity, ask them to leave the area to decrease distraction or provocation, and protect the young person's dignity.
- They could also then notify another adult of the



situation, for support if needed.

Calming techniques

As a person starts behaving in an aggressive manner, you must attempt to calm them down. Calming techniques include:

- an open, relaxed body posture,
- remain calm, and show concern in your face
- act in control (even if you feel stressed)
- keep neutral eye contact if possible, without staring, (be aware if culturally inappropriate with some Indigenous people)
- give space - a safe distance away and aware of the exits
- show you are listening
- acknowledge the person's emotions, and give empathy – "It has to be frustrating when"... "Most people would be angry if...." "You seem pretty upset about",
- use simple, calm language. Try the rule of 5 - no more than 5 words in a sentence, or 5 letters in a word -- eg, "Would you like a phone?"
- ask them what they need, want or think
- try problem solving with the individual -- ask "What will help now?"
- give them more than one option, so they have some control over the situation. For example, "Let's go for a walk, or would you like to talk a friend?"
- do not get strong and loud - the situation can worsen
- do not get distracted – stay focused on them.

Re-direction techniques

Re-directing someone who is escalated means giving them a task to think about, focus on or do, which gets their mind off the reason for their aggression. If a person's attention gets called away from the source of his anger, the anger can dissipate.

Try asking a question they will want to think about. e.g. asking where he learned to

play basketball so well, or would he like something to eat/drink or to make a phone call. As you get to know the students, you will learn the things that work effectively for redirecting.

Verbal diffusion

If the situation has escalated and calming and redirection attempts are unsuccessful, the goal is to talk the student out of aggressive or dangerous behaviour. Calmly give the person reasons for not doing the action, and provide them options that could allow a dignified way out of the situation. The young person may not have intended the situation to get this far but they don't know how to back down. Explain particularly what the next step in **your Residence policy involves**, e.g. calling for assistance, police involvement or any use of physical restraint, before you do that next step.

Physical restraint

Know and follow your Residence policy. You will need to assess the situation and make a judgement quickly as to how you will respond within your residence procedure, and by weighing up the risks and possible outcomes. Physical restraint must **ONLY** ever be used to prevent **real and immediate serious physical harm**.



In severe cases, physical restraint/intervention may be the only way to keep a person safe during a crisis.

Talk to the person gently, explaining your intent and use the most minimal physical intervention as possible, for the most minimal amount of time possible to calm the young person. Remember you may be heightened yourself due to the emotion of the situation. If you restrain a student you must be able to justify why this action was judged to be necessary in order to maintain safety of the student or other students.

Document the event and report to management immediately, with a clear, factual, report.

4. What is inappropriate intervention?

- Physical intervention when no immediate harm is actually imminent (only threatened).
- Incorrect or over-forceful physical intervention.
- Disregard for boundaries of time, place and physical touch.
- Unprofessional, over-reaction to the situation eg shouting, swearing, panic.
- Abnormal, overly authoritarian treatment of young people

Potential repercussions of inappropriate intervention

The legal, physical and emotional repercussions of inappropriate staff intervention:

- possible psychological or physical harm to young people,
- negative public image and complaints,
- low morale and lack of trust among staff,
- disappointment and self-doubt,
- employee correction, warning or dismissal,
- potential exposure to liability,
- turmoil and detraction from the core business,
- loyalty conflicts,
- long-term career harm to staff member.

All boarding residence staff have a professional and ethical responsibility to promote a healthy workplace environment that is free of aggression, harassment and intimidation.

An organizational culture that clearly conveys zero tolerance for inappropriate staff behaviour, while providing the necessary resources and mechanisms to safeguard against such behaviour, can improve teamwork, foster a sense of mutual respect, and improve student care.

To do so involves:

- A clearly articulated code of conduct and policy against inappropriate behaviour,
- Employee training on inappropriate behaviour and its prevention,
- A procedure for reporting allegations of inappropriate behaviour,
- A procedure for investigating complaints of inappropriate behaviour,
- Clear standards for corrective action.

5. Other considerations

Coercive or non-coercive

There are diverse strategies for responding to student behaviour that could be placed on a continuum from coercive to non-coercive responses. Coercive responses involve doing things **to** young people and taking away their choice or control, rather than working with them. Non-coercive responses involve working **with** young people without dominating them or forcing them to adopt specific behaviour.

Non-coercive strategies support young people, give them choices and assist them to adopt behaviour that is considerate and not harmful. The focus is usually on creating a positive environment. Strategies include building good relationships with young people, understanding their needs, developing a safety plan, establishing boundaries and structure, working with group dynamics, negotiation and mediation, and teamwork.

Other more coercive strategies for managing behaviour include use of consequences such as extra duties and loss of privileges, and exclusion from the residence (suspension), or even involvement of the police. These may at times be identified as being appropriate to maintain order or to prevent serious harm to the student themselves or others in the immediate environment.

Duress alarms

A duress alarm is a system installed in a centre for staff to use if faced with a significant threat or act of aggression to:

- alert others that an incident is occurring,
- trigger a support response, and
- notify others to avoid the area if possible.



Alarm systems vary according to residence need. Some systems;

- have centrally located buttons, others have mobile phone type handpieces and others have a wristwatch type unit worn by staff.
- have audible internal and/or external sirens, others may have a blue flashing light external to the centre, while others simply have an alarm that goes straight to the Security monitoring firm.
- provide location and user Information wirelessly and discreetly. A message is automatically sent over the wireless repeater network to the hub. The alarm information is then sent to other individuals on the duress system providing both the identity AND the location from where the alarm was triggered. This allows the response teams or security personnel to not only know who they are looking for, but also where.
- have a reply option; the sender can request acknowledgments back, eliminating the guesswork of whether a message was received or not.
- have an option to also be used for routine messaging such as student announcements.

Once activated, most of these alarms remain activated until they are manually reset.

Note: We always appreciate feedback. This can be done by email or via the facebook page.

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