
Hostile-Aggressive Behavior...

preventing and dealing with challenging behavior

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

Students who are hostile-aggressive are encountered (and certainly dreaded) by just about every teacher. These are the students classically regarded as "problem students." They often have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, emotional or behavioral disorders, or are below grade level in achievement. They are capable of dominating and controlling others through intimidation and irrational, often explosive behavior. This tip sheet looks at the characteristics of the classic hostile-aggressive student, examines reasons for such behavior, and gives suggestions for dealing with such students.

How does the hostile-aggressive student act out?

One can categorize the acting-out behavior of hostile-aggressive students into three general categories: verbal aggression, physical aggression, and vandalism. What distinguishes these behaviors as exhibited by the hostile-aggressive student is that they are done with intent to do harm, whether that be physical, emotional, or for revenge and retaliation.

Verbal aggression includes defiance, continuous arguing, cut-downs, threats, swearing, bossing, sarcasm, and teasing. Physical aggression can be exhibited as kicking, hitting, fighting, spitting, throwing materials with intent to do harm (either to a person or to objects, i.e., a window) and biting, among others. (Be sure to learn as much as you can about the student from his or her file as well as through observation; some of these behaviors could be a result of Tourette's Disorder.) Vandalism includes not only destruction or damage to property but theft as well.

What causes students to behave this way?

There are many theories as to what causes hostile-aggressive behavior in children. Several which are especially important to teachers are as follows:

Modeling: Children observe hostile-aggressive behavior modeled by parents, teachers, peers, and in the media. Threats from parents, yelled reprimands from teachers, and violence among peers and in the media are then mimicked by the child.

Peer Reinforcement: Behavior such as fighting is reinforced by peers when they take sides in or cheer for individuals who are fighting. This leads to an increase in hostile-aggressive behavior.

Social Skills Deficit: Children lack the social skills necessary to deal with stressful situations in an assertive rather than aggressive manner. Their repertoire of problem-solving skills is limited to aggression, so they use this to fulfill their needs.

Low Self-Esteem: The hostile-aggressive child acts out of anger. This reflects poor self-image and an identity of failure "resulting from an inability to satisfy two basic needs: giving and receiving love, and having a sense of worth" (Medick, p. 73, 1979). They believe that it is not all right to feel anger and frustration and think they are bad people when they do have these feelings. Their behavior has led to rejection by both adults and peers, which causes their self-esteem to further plummet.

What causes conflict with the hostile-aggressive student to escalate?

Student frustration triggers hostile-aggressive behavior. Frustration with others or oneself is dealt with through physical or verbal aggression or vandalism. With this behavior, the student gains negative attention from the teacher or peers. The teacher instinctively responds by reprimanding the student or asking him or her to cease the behavior which the student is using to gain attention.

This leads to the next phase of the cycle: student defensiveness. The student begins to lose control and will verbally lash out at the teacher, usually assuming the role of the victim ("You always pick on me," "Leave me alone," "I didn't do anything").

At this point, the teacher is probably angry, confused, and wants to re-establish that "the teacher is in control and will be listened to and obeyed at all costs." Through his or her hostile acts, the student has succeeded in getting the teacher to aggress.

The student will now begin to exhibit more hostile-aggressive behaviors until the teacher "lays down the law," which, although it ends the cycle, reinforces the student's belief that he or she is the victim and that adults unfairly take their anger out on students.

The teacher is left with feelings of failure, defeat, and confusion, while negative feelings toward the student are reinforced. This leads to the probability that the teacher will respond more quickly and angrily to the student in the future, reinforcing the student's behavior and leading to further deterioration of both student and teacher self-esteem.

What are the typical teacher responses to these behaviors, and how do students react to these responses?

Teachers typically respond in one of two ways: authoritatively or attempting to reason with the student. When teachers respond authoritatively, it is because they feel they have lost control over the situation. Reacting as an authoritarian figure, the teacher gives ultimatums: "You better do what I say or else." The hostile-aggressive student responds by acting as if he or she really does not care what the teacher says or does and continues hostile-aggressive behavior, whether physically or verbally: "I hate you! You can't make me do anything." The irony of this is that they are right. You can not make any student do anything. While reacting authoritatively is an understandable response from the teacher, it is simply ineffective.

The other way teachers typically respond is by attempting to reason with the hostile-aggressive student. They understand that the student's behavior is not a personal attack but indicative of an inferior ability to deal with emotions. This teacher attempts to explain with kindness and understanding what is really going on. However sincere these attempts are, they usually lead to circular arguments, dead ends, or resentment from the student. The teacher ends up expending huge amounts of energy and is left feeling frustrated and unsuccessful.

How do I intervene with a hostile-aggressive student?

Identify those behaviors which are inappropriate and perform a functional assessment. Doing an "A-B-C" (antecedent, behavior, consequence) chart can be very helpful in understanding what particular situations tend to set the student off.

Next, examine how you have been dealing with the behavior and evaluate what has been contributing to conflict and whether anything has de-escalated these situations in the past. Drop what is not working and identify any methods which are working. A good rule of thumb is if you are left feeling angry and out of control, your method is ineffective.

After you have evaluated the behavior of both the student and yourself, it is time to put together a proactive intervention plan. This includes outlining proactive behavior modification strategies, reinforcement plans, and teaching new functional behavior which will replace the student's inappropriate ways of dealing with emotion. It can be helpful to hold a conference with the student and, if possible, with the student's parents. Let the student know what is and is not acceptable and how you will help him or her to learn behavior which is appropriate. Using a cue when you sense the student's behavior is escalating can be helpful in teaching the student to be aware of his or her own behavior and to remind the student to use the appropriate behaviors which you have taught.

Stick to and periodically evaluate your intervention. Keep in mind that it took the student a long time to learn these behaviors and it will likely take a long time to replace them with others. Do not let yourself fall into old patterns of reacting angrily.

Let the student know you care about him or her. Make it a point to give the student some brief friendly attention each day. Give the student the opportunity to talk about feelings and give reinforcement. Give the student special responsibilities. This will show that while you do not appreciate his or her behavior, you do see him or her as a worthwhile and capable individual.

It is important that the student learn that it is okay to feel frustrated and angry and that there are acceptable ways of expressing these emotions.

What proactive interventions are effective in changing hostile-aggressive behavior?

Positive reinforcement is very important in improving the student's self-esteem and changing his or her self-perception. **Modeling** and **role-playing** help the student learn new behavior. **Token economies** can also be useful in motivating the student to change behavior. **Cooperative learning** gives students the opportunity to learn from their peers. **Self-monitoring** and **cuing** can help a student assume more responsibility for his or her behavior. (See tip sheets with respective titles.)

How do I avoid being drawn into the conflict or get out of it once I recognize that it is going on?

Remember, these tactics are only to help you avoid or get out of a conflict cycle. They alone will not ultimately change the student's behavior. To do this, you must perform a functional assessment and implement a long-term proactive intervention plan, including techniques such as those listed earlier.

First, you must learn to not allow yourself to be emotionally manipulated. Use self-talk to tell yourself, "I know what the student is doing and why. It is not a personal attack against me, and I will remain calm while trying to help the student."

When you recognize the student is becoming hostile, remember that this stems from frustration. The student needs support. Helping the student to recognize his or her emotions and giving the student the opportunity to deal with them effectively will help. You might have a quiet spot in the room where students can go when they feel that their emotions are getting the best of them.

If the cycle has not been stopped at the frustration stage, you will have to deal with the next stage: defensiveness. At this point, you will need to set limits for the student. For example, if the student has been verbally abusive to another student, you might establish limits in the context of a choice: "Lisa, you need to either quietly continue with your English assignment or put your head down on your desk until you are calm and ready to talk about this." You have defined the limits and left the decision up to the student. You have also stepped out of a conflict cycle by remaining calm.

If the student persists and becomes more aggressive, for example, by beginning to verbally abuse you, you need to provide control. Say, "Lisa, come with me," leave the room, and wait for her to follow. Do not give her the opportunity to argue with you and escalate the conflict further. When you are alone, you could tell her, "Your behavior is unacceptable. You can either come and sit quietly in the class or you can sit here in the hall until you are able to control yourself. Either way, I need to attend to the other students in the class. We will talk about this after you have demonstrated that you are in control by either sitting quietly here or in the classroom until I am ready to speak with you."

Once the student has regained control, you will want to take time to talk to her about what occurred and how you can both work to prevent it from happening again.

How will I know that progress is being made in changing the student's behavior?

The ultimate measure is the degree to which the student's behavior is maintained and generalized. The student may begin to behave acceptably in your classroom, but is he or she improving in other classrooms/situations? Often hostile-aggressive students see authority figures as deliberately waiting for them to mess up, as waiting to set them up for failure, and this view can hinder progress. It can be confronted by having a private conference

with the student. You may begin by talking about all the progress and positive change you have seen. Let the student know that you see that he or she can continue to have more and more success, but that this will be difficult if teachers, etc., are seen as enemies and treated suspiciously. Engage the student in a conversation about what generally happens to students (or people in general) who do and do not cooperate with teachers and other authority figures and rules. Remain calm and courteous so that you display the fact that you do care and that you do want the student to succeed. Finally, let the student know that it is up to him or her to decide whether to take this final step. Do not expect the student to make a decision then and there. It may take time, so continue to be caring and courteous, modeling a friendly authority figure.

Not every student will make that final leap and it is something which only the student can decide. Continue to be consistent in dealing with the student and do not hold yourself responsible for the student's decisions. Remember that there are many other areas in the student's life (home, friendship, etc.) which exert great influence over the student and over which you have no control.

One thing you can continue to do, no matter what, is to work with the student to build their self-esteem. This may help the student to choose to see authority figures as people who can help and to see him- or herself as worthy and entitled to this help. Positive reinforcement, being given special responsibilities in the classroom, and tutoring peers (see tip sheet entitled "Peer Tutoring") are all ways to help build student self-esteem.

Other issues in dealing with hostile-aggressive students...

First, as you get to know a student and he or she begins to make progress, there may be times when the student appears to be behaving in a hostile fashion, but closer observation reveals that he or she is following through with what has been requested. For example, Josh has knocked all of his books on the floor in frustration and you have said, "Josh, that is not acceptable behavior. If you want help, raise your hand. In the meantime, please pick up your books." Josh retorts, "You're always picking on me. I hate this stupid class and I hate you, too!" But you observe that Josh is, in fact, picking up his books. This is a time to ignore his outburst, let him pick up his books, cool off, and talk about it later.

Second, *never corner a student who is emotionally out of control*. Leave a student who is out of control with a large personal space and a way out of the room. Running out of the room is much more appropriate than hitting a teacher.

Finally, do not argue with students. Give choices and the option to discuss an incident later, but do not argue. These are not the same. Discussion leads to collaborative solutions while arguments lead to defensiveness.

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This publication was supported by Grant #H029K20171, *Special Project to Provide Technical Assistance, Inservice Training and Site Development for Positive Behavioral Support Strategies for Students with Disabilities* from the U.S. Department of Education. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity employer and educator.