
Physical Restraint...

an emergency procedure

This 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

Physical restraint is a procedure with which a person uses his or her body to effectively and immediately control or immobilize another. It may sometimes be necessary to physically restrain a student in order to protect the safety of staff and students.

It is also a procedure which has often been misapplied and overused, and it has led to lawsuits contending the violation of student constitutional rights. For these reasons, it is important to examine the risks of physical restraint, to establish when it is or is not appropriate, and how the need for it can be prevented.

What is the appropriate use of physical restraint?

The only appropriate use of physical restraint when working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders is to prevent a student from injuring him- or herself or others, or from damaging valuable property. It should be used only for protection. For example, if an angry student begins to physically assault another student or attempts to knock over a television-VCR stand, physical restraint would be appropriate. When it is used for these reasons, it should be done in a way that calms the student and does not frighten or hurt him or her (Stone, 1990).

It is important that a student be given every opportunity to control his or her own behavior before physical restraint is used. Schloss and Smith (1987) give the following steps to be followed before resorting to physical restraint:

- "(a) verbally instruct the student to engage in nonaggressive behavior;
- (b) if the student remains in an aggressive posture 3 seconds after the verbal prompt, provide a gentle manual prompt (e.g., softly press against the learner's shoulder) and repeat the verbal prompt;
- (c) if after 3 additional seconds the student is still in an aggressive posture, physically direct him/her to a safe area using accepted manual restraint techniques;
- (d) once restrained in the safe area, provide frequent verbal cues indicating "I can let go of you when you are relaxed;"
- (e) once the student has remained relaxed for 3 minutes, the educator should gradually relinquish physical control and proceed in educational and therapeutic aspects of the behavior management program.

If the student's behavior escalates so rapidly that waiting 3 seconds between steps would be hazardous, manual restraint should be used immediately."

It is also very important for the teacher to maintain a calm and impartial manner when this procedure is undertaken. Research has shown that this facilitates the efficacy of physical restraint, while using a harsh tone, threatening, or using excessive force causes escalation of aggression (Schloss & Smith, 1987).

When should physical restraint not be used?

First and foremost, physical restraint should not be used by anyone who has not been formally trained in its proper and effective implementation specific to dealing with students.

Second, it should not be used simply for convenience when dealing with challenging behavior. For example, if Choua asks Josh to sit down so that he can see the filmstrip and Josh refuses to sit down and starts verbally

attacking Choua, physical restraint would not be appropriate. As long as neither Choua, Josh, nor any equipment in the room is in danger, there is a better way to deal with the situation. Although restraint may seem like a more efficacious intervention, it will not teach Josh anything except that others will control his behavior, and it is likely to incite more anger from him.

Finally, physical restraint should not be used as a substitute for meaningful programming. Any challenging behavior, violent or not, will only change if a student learns behaviors which are appropriate and effective for meeting his or her needs. Mastering desirable behaviors and eliminating others is effectively facilitated with behavior modification. (*See tip sheets entitled "Positive Programming" and "Positive Reinforcement."*)

What are the risks of using physical restraint?

While physical restraint might initially seem like an effective and relatively easy way to stop an out-of-control student, it is not. There are many risks involved with using physical restraint. One of the most obvious is that of injury, to both the out-of-control student and to the person performing the restraint. Even if a student is small, someone who is out of control can exhibit uncharacteristic strength.

Another risk is that physical restraint can actually cause an increase in violent behavior. Some students may find it reinforcing to be restrained by a teacher. They may find the struggle helps them vent their emotions or they may simply enjoy being the center of attention. For these reasons, it is very important to assess the reasons which may be behind a student's aggression. (*See tip sheet entitled "Positive Reinforcement."*)

A final risk is the possibility of legal recourse. Historically physical restraint has been overused and abused (Morgan & Jensen, 1988). If a student or a student's parents feel that the use of physical restraint was excessive or inappropriate, they may, as others have, take legal action against a teacher and a school.

What are the potential effects of physical restraint?

Physical restraint can have long-lasting negative effects on both the student and the teacher. As previously explained, it can actually serve to reinforce undesirable behavior in the student. On the other hand, the quick cessation of undesirable student behaviors can reinforce the teacher to use it more often and with greater intensity.

Increased student/teacher tension between the teacher and all students can also result. Students seeing a teacher implement physical restraint may not feel that they can trust that teacher and may not feel safe when in his or her classroom. A teacher's tension may increase in anticipation to having to implement physical restraint and the teacher may begin to experience high levels of stress in the classroom from using this aversive procedure.

What should precede the use of physical restraint?

The most important thing which should take place before implementing physical restraint is professional training and guided practice. This is imperative even if you doubt that you will ever need to implement it or and even if you are already trained in some other form of self-defense.

Before ever using physical restraint, you need to form a plan for your classroom and make sure that your students know and understand this plan. This is something which is often overlooked and is very important, especially when working with older students who can be very difficult to control. Develop a plan for obtaining assistance from another adult. This may involve sending a student to get a specific teacher in a nearby classroom or having a student call the office on the phone or intercom. Make sure that you have worked out your plan with the designated adult ahead of time so that they will know why they are being summoned, will what to do, and will respond quickly. Also, make sure there is a back-up person in case one adult is gone.

Also, in case it is necessary that the rest of your students leave the room, make sure you have an evacuation plan. The students should know where they are supposed to go and be able to get there quickly. You may make a reciprocal agreement with a neighboring teacher that your students will go to his or her room in case of emergency and vice versa. This way, your students are being supervised and you do not need to worry about further problems arising.

What should I do when violence seems imminent?

First, put your plan into action. Then move anything which may be used as a weapon (chairs, books, pencils, etc.) away from the student. Consider whether it is necessary for the other students to leave the room. Make sure that the student has about three feet of space around him or her and that he or she is not cornered. A student who feels caged is much more likely to attack. Furthermore, make sure that the student has an escape route. If you stand between the student and escape, he or she may do whatever is necessary to access that escape.

When approaching a student who is upset, Hughes (1985) recommends taking the following steps:

1. Assume a nonthreatening posture. Keep your hands in front of your body and free in case you need to block a punch if the student does attack.
2. Speak in a soothing voice, calling the student by name. Tell the student what you want him or her to do and do not lie to the student about what you will or will not do.
3. Approach the upset student slowly, from the front and slightly to one side. Leave the student personal space, maintain eye contact, and speak softly.

Where can I get more information and training in the use of physical restraint?

It is very important for all staff to have formal training from professional trainers so that if physical restraint ever is necessary, everyone is comfortable and confident in using it properly. Contact your school district office or your district's special education office to find out if inservice training is provided. Other resources include:

National Crisis Prevention Institute, Inc.
3315-K North 1245h Street
Brookfield, WI 53005
1-800-558-8976

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