

Defusing Violent Behavior in Young Children: An Ounce of Prevention: Information for School Principals



Ensuring a healthy start. Promoting a bright future.

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It is Thursday morning and time for Ms. Smith's first graders to move from reading to art class. Most students put away their workbooks and line up as requested. Six-year-old Andy ignores her instructions, even when she repeats them. Another student tells Andy to hurry up. Suddenly Andy swears loudly and hurls his book across the room, banging his fists on the desk. Ms. Smith tells Andy to stop and to pick up the book. Andy screams he wants to kill her, knocks over his chair, and proceeds to kick and hit nearby desks. Ms. Smith asks the class to wait while she brings Andy, struggling, to your office where he breaks down into angry tears. This is the third such episode in two weeks. Three days earlier, Andy had thrown his lunch tray on the ground when the cafeteria monitor told the table to quiet down. The week before, he threatened to "smash in" the face of a classmate who complained that Andy's rhythmic kicking of the chair leg was bothering him. Visits to your office, talks with the counselor, and restriction of privileges do not seem to be changing Andy's behavior.

If this scenario sounds familiar, you are not alone. The "explosive" behavior typified by Andy is at the extreme end of a growing trend in violent behavior among young children. Many elementary school principals and teachers spend an inordinate amount of time managing outbursts and stopping bullying or other forms of physical and verbal aggression. The exact cause of the trend is not clear but experts cite a number of societal and family factors as well as an increase in psychiatric disorders in children and the loss of social development time in the early elementary classroom. The costs, however, are clear. Violent or aggressive behavior undermines the integrity of the learning environment, interferes with children's academic and social outcomes, contributes to staff and student stress, and threatens school safety.

Addressing the problem in the preschool and early elementary grades is paramount. Redirecting inappropriate behavior in its beginning stages will more likely prevent later development of intractable patterns of violence and disruption. Violent behavior among young children does not necessarily reflect willfulness; often the child lacks the requisite social skills—skills that schools can help them learn. The key is to preserve the safety and learning experience of all students *and* to promote improved behavior on the part of the child in question.

Changing Violent Behavior

Children who exhibit explosive or noncompliant behavior like Andy present the most difficult challenge to school personnel and parents. These children are chronically violent or aggressive and may be defiant, start fights, push, kick, hit or grab, throw things, verbally threaten classmates or staff, or destroy property. Some children respond to verbal prompts to interrupt and stop this type of behavior. Others melt down with little obvious provocation and, once they "lose it," cannot be reached until they have exhausted their rage. Typically, these children do not handle transitions or unexpected change well and have low tolerance for frustration. This is different from violent behavior that is "episodic" (i.e., out of the norm for the child and perhaps the result of an isolated event at school or home) or "goal oriented" (i.e., employed to achieve a specific desire or targeted at a specific person).

The underlying cause(s) of explosive/noncompliant behavior are complex and may be accompanied by other negative behaviors or problems. Leading experts like Dr. Ross Greene, author of *The Explosive Child*, suggest that the most effective way to help such children is to give them the mechanisms to recognize and prevent outbursts before they happen. While the intensity and specificity of interventions may differ, the basic strategies outlined below can help build and reinforce positive behavior in all students.

Facilitate prevention and problem solving. Principals are instrumental to creating a school environment in which children learn positive behavior skills. Much of the time administrators spend with children like Andy is focused on disciplining or "cleaning up" after a meltdown, often with little long-term benefit. Certainly discipline plays a role in violence prevention, but it should be employed as a teaching mechanism, not just a means of containing the behavior. You will significantly increase your effectiveness if you put in place comprehensive prevention strategies and develop an intervention process that emphasizes problem solving, not punishment, and facilitates collaboration between staff, parents, and students. (**See inset box.**) Effective strategies focus on:

- Prevention at both the system and individual levels.
- Understanding the underlying impetus for the behavior.
- Identifying and building the necessary skills to make more appropriate choices.

Prevention and Problem Solving Strategies

- Implement a school-wide approach to build positive behavior skills for all students.
- Communicate to students, staff, and parents expectations for behavior and how specific social skills will help students achieve that behavior.
- Reinforce behavior values and desired skills throughout the building by using bulletin boards, wall charts, morning announcements, etc.
- Have teachers introduce expectations at the beginning of the year and regularly incorporate opportunities for learning coping skills into the school day.
- Congratulate children when you see them make a good choice.
- Model the skills you want the children to learn.
- Provide teachers and support staff, including playground aides, lunchroom monitors, and bus drivers, with training.
- Develop a problem solving, team approach with your staff.
- Designate an office or special place as a “time out room” for children who need to regain safe control. Make sure children know where it is and what adult(s) will be there to help them. This is often the counselor’s office or your office.
- Reach out to parents. Invite them to let you know if they are concerned about behavior problems at home. Offer to be a resource.
- Build trust with students by being accessible and encouraging.

Create a positive framework for changing behavior.

Although explosive/noncompliant children need individual assessment and interventions, they benefit like all children from school-wide programs that promote positive behavior skills. Many schools have adopted social skills programs as part of the curriculum with great success. These programs emphasize teaching positive skills, not punishing negative behavior; provide a universal language or set of steps to facilitate learning desired behaviors; and foster values of empathy, caring, respect, self-awareness, and self-restraint. Your school psychologist or counselor can help select and implement a well-established program that is best suited to your school. A school-wide approach helps children with violent behavior in four important ways:

- Provides them the natural opportunity to learn and practice alternative skills under a variety of daily circumstances.
- Lays out an action plan for children to help themselves and each other behave appropriately.
- Gives children a common language with which to express their feelings and communicate with peers and adults.
- Puts the aggressive child’s need for more intensive interventions within the positive context of learning something everyone else is learning, too.

“Normalizing” social learning enables children to understand that classmates like Andy need extra help from the teacher to learn to cope with frustration, just as Susie may need special help learning to read. You also want to help children distinguish between *unacceptable behavior* and *acceptable differences* in learning and socialization. Clearly Andy’s reaction was inappropriate, but his need to complete his work or transition differently than his classmates is not. This perspective helps preserve the troubled child’s self-esteem and is a valuable message in teaching children tolerance.

Identify the underlying impetus of the behavior. The first and crucial step to changing behavior is to determine why the child resorts to violence or aggression in the first place. Ultimately the behavior is accomplishing what the child wants—or feels he wants—and it is important to know why. Is he frustrated or angry, avoiding an undesirable task or anticipated stressor, seeking attention, exacting revenge, or modeling behavior of others? He also may be exhibiting symptoms of a psychiatric disorder. Explosive/noncompliant behavior is often linked to a psychiatric diagnosis, such as bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, Tourette Syndrome, Asperger’s disorder, and depression. You can work with the parents, teacher, and school psychologist to identify the cause as well as triggers for the behavior, and to determine if a more thorough psychiatric evaluation is warranted. The goal is to address the underlying issue(s) and help the child reframe his objective (e.g., learning to master the task instead of avoiding it) at the same time he is building communication and self-control skills.

Determine the circumstances that trigger outbursts.

Identifying a pattern of when and how the child acts out helps define the factors that trigger the behavior and, subsequently, suggests strategies that will most effectively correct it. For instance, is the child aggravated by a particular kind of activity like writing or because he is slower than his classmates; uncomfortable in a specific setting; responding to interaction with a certain child; resistant to an adult command; or unnerved by the transition process? In some cases, the best approach may be to keep the child away from those situations that prove especially difficult, modify situational demands to reduce stress, or directly teach the child necessary coping or performance skills. You and the teacher may also need to “ignore” certain non-risky behaviors (e.g., walking around in the middle of class) that, when interrupted, set the child off. At a minimum you want to establish alternatives that he and the teacher know are acceptable. It is also a good idea to ask your school psychologist to develop uniform criteria for assessing behavior. This helps minimize inconsistencies in referrals due to different behavior tolerances among teachers.

Stay in front of the meltdown. Everyone is better off—the child, his classmates, and the staff—if adults can help the child stop the meltdown before it starts. Not only does this minimize the negative impact on others, it changes the child’s expectation that “losing it” is his only option. In the beginning, school staff may need to intervene quite a bit, but the eventual objective is to enable the child to manage his reactions himself.

Identifying the precursor behaviors that indicate the child is getting upset is important. Children usually have a

pattern of behaviors that express their growing frustration, e.g., clenching their fists, jiggling their leg, or making sounds of exasperation. These clue the teacher as to when to intervene. It also is important to teach the child to recognize these signs and the corresponding feelings and thoughts in order to *implement coping strategies* before losing control. Again, you want to work with all of the adults involved and the student to determine what approaches are most effective. If applicable, these strategies would be incorporated into the child's IEP. Examples include establishing a "safe" place in the classroom where the child can collect himself, developing a signal between the teacher and student that says, "I am having trouble," allowing the child extra time to complete work or transition to another activity, or providing alternative means to do an assignment. Even eliciting the help of a classmate can be effective. Asking Tyler to help Andy organize his things not only minimizes Andy's frustration but also fosters positive social interactions between the two boys.

Show the child that you are an advocate for his success.

As a principal, you advocate for every student's success, but children with serious behavior problems may need extra encouragement to feel supported. Begin interactions with the child by acknowledging some strength or example of his competency. Go out of your way to catch him succeeding. Try to spend some time with him other than in the midst of a crisis. For instance, eat lunch together or play a favorite game at recess. Convey that your involvement in a problem does not signal a failure on his part but rather your commitment to help him, his teacher and parents find a solution. This problem-solving approach is not only more effective, it also helps establish a sense of trust with the student and reduces parent defensiveness.

Engage parents as partners. The cooperation of the child's parents is essential to changing difficult behavior. The child is almost certainly exhibiting similar behavior at home. The parents themselves may be worried or frustrated. They may also need to adjust some of their own behavior or approach to the problem and may feel they are being judged. Do not try to establish your relationship with them over the phone. Schedule a meeting. Good face-to-face communications from the start will minimize confrontation and help parents view you and your staff as a resource. Avoid beginning the conversation with a litany of negatives. Instead emphasize the child's strengths and how they can be built into the problem solving process. Ask the parents to identify triggers and precursor behaviors that they have observed and to recommend coping strategies that work at home. Maintain open communication and determine how they prefer to be contacted if their child is having difficulty, e.g., a phone call, note home, or e-mail.

An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure.

The upfront work involved in helping the explosive/noncompliant child may seem daunting but the investment is worth it. These children have the potential to become positive contributors to or serious problems for society in the future. The skills they learn in elementary school will carry them through later school experiences and into adulthood. As in all areas of life, the cost of prevention strategies is far lower than

the cost of remediating or containing far more serious problems down the road.

Resources

The ACCEPTS Program,
www.proedinc.com/store/index.php?mode=product_detail&id=0365

The Explosive Child, Dr. Ross Greene,
www.explosivechild.com/

The FAST Track Program (Families and Schools Together,
www.fasttrackproject.org/)

The Incredible Years Parents Teachers and Children Training Series, www.incredibleyears.com/

National Association of School Psychologists publications,
Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts From Your School Psychologist,

www.nasponline.org/publications/booksproducts.aspx

The PREPARE Curriculum: Teaching Prosocial Competencies,
www.researchpress.com/scripts/product.asp?item=5063

Primary Mental Health Project,

www.sharingsuccess.org/code/eptw/pdf_profiles/pmhp.pdf

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