

Chapter 8

Aggression

Maria is a student in your fifth-grade class. She enjoys being the center of attention and can be quite charming. However, you are aware that she is frequently in trouble at school and has regular meetings with the school counselor and other professionals in the community.

Since the beginning of the year, you have addressed some of Maria's challenging behaviors, such as pushing items off her desk, throwing objects in the room, yelling, and banging her desk with her hands. These behavior incidents are very disruptive to your classroom, but afterward Maria seems remorseful and shows a desire to work on assigned activities. Less frequently, she has pushed and threatened other students. She once made a verbal threat toward you when you attempted to set limits with her in the middle of an outburst. The other students appear somewhat fearful of her. They are receptive when she initiates interaction, but they do not seek out her company.

Maria's other teachers report similar problems in their classes. Your colleagues have tried various methods, but none have seen lasting improvements. Maria has outside professionals working with her, but you are not sure exactly what strategies they are using. As Maria's difficulties worsen, school administrators consider developing an individualized education program.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE

- Physical aggression, such as hitting, pushing, kicking, or spitting
- Threatening or intimidating physical postures, such as raising a fist, standing over a seated peer, glaring stares

- Verbal aggression, such as yelling, swearing, name calling, or threatening
- An identifiable cause of the aggressive behavior may be readily apparent, or the behavior may appear to be “out of the blue.”
- May be well liked by peers (not necessarily associated with peer rejection)
- May have negative attitudes toward school
- Other types of treatment providers may be involved in meetings about the student, classroom observations, and so forth.
- The student may have formalized plans or guidelines put into place by school personnel (school counselor/psychologist or other team members)

DESCRIPTION OF PROBLEMS

Some students who demonstrate aggressive behavior might only do so in certain situations, such as in response to a specific, unwanted demand. Other students exhibit aggressive behavior in a variety of contexts as part of a larger set of problems involving frequent violations of the rights of others. An individual may engage in a very narrow range of aggressive behavior (e.g., only verbal threats) or a broad range of aggressive behavior (e.g., threats, posturing, angry stares, throwing objects, fighting). With some students, this behavior may be seen as controlled and calculated, and with other students it may seem more volatile and impulsive.

The causes of aggressive behavior are often multidimensional and challenging to accurately assess. Aggressive behavior can be used as a way to achieve a desired outcome, such as avoidance of a particular task, or it can be the result of poor frustration tolerance and limited behavioral control. Often, there are several reasons for the aggressive behavior, which may involve biological, psychological, and social factors. Because of the potential complexity of the underlying causes of aggressive behavior, hasty or overly simplistic explanations (e.g., “She is doing it for attention”) are likely inaccurate or only partially accurate.

Regardless of the cause of the aggressive behavior, it should be considered a serious problem that will interfere with many aspects of the student’s life if it persists. It also will undoubtedly affect peers who are exposed to it. Aggressive behaviors are associated with problems in academic achievement, social development, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. In some cases, aggressive behavior precedes association with a negative peer group, substance abuse, and involvement in the legal system.

Recommendations

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

Ask Yourself

What safety concerns do you have (either for other students or yourself)?

Is there anything about the environment of the classroom that increases risk, such as heavy/sharp objects or breakable glass equipment?

- *Prevention:* Focus your effort on prevention because this is the area in which you are most likely to be effective. After an aggressive outburst, especially one that involves physical violence, you should follow your school's safety procedures and disciplinary process.
- *Know warning signs:* Use your keen observation to become aware of the pattern of aggressive behavior. What happens in the days and hours leading up to the behavior? What happens right before the behavior? What changes did you notice in the student's demeanor or attitudes? What changes occurred in the environment? What were her interactions with other students like? What interactions did you have with the student before an act of aggression?
- *Stay the course:* Remain consistent in your approach and your interventions with the student in your classroom. Work as a team member with other professionals who may be involved with the student; consistency across classes and between home and school will contribute to positive results.
- *Connect:* Although the aggressive behavior is likely your most pressing concern (and rightfully so), make a conscious decision to get to know the student. Find out what interests and motivates the student, what captures her attention, and to what she responds. The relationship you build during times of calm will be an important tool when attempting to divert acts of aggression.
- *Teamwork:* Remember that aggressive behavior is a complex and difficult problem that is best managed by a team of professionals. Discuss the concerns you are having in your classroom with other teachers and administrators. Look for similarities and differences in their observations and yours.
- *Plan ahead, and use your resources:* If aggressive behavior disrupts your classroom, consider working with colleagues to move your students to another location. Prepare for this ahead of time by being ready with needed materials and talking with your colleagues about how to coordinate such a response. Although this may be an inconvenience for the rest of your class, maintaining the safety of all students is the highest priority.
- *Support your other students:* Provide praise and encouragement to students who are exposed to a peer's aggressive behaviors but who do not imitate or use that peer's example as a justification to act out themselves. Be attentive to the feelings and sense of safety of students after they have witnessed an act of aggression. For some, witnessing such an event can be as troubling as being

the target of the hostility. Witnesses may also require a referral to speak with a school counselor or administrator for additional support.

Keep in Mind

- Both verbal and physical aggression by students can be upsetting to witness and are a drain on your time, energy, and other resources. Be sure to take care of yourself, too. If you are feeling burned out, plan some restful activities and share your thoughts and feelings with a trusted colleague or friend. If you work in a school with frequent violence or the threat of violence, you are also subject to chronic stress. This can creep up on you over weeks or months.

COLLABORATING WITH STUDENTS

Ask Yourself

Does the student's aggression build up over minutes or hours, or does it suddenly appear?

How do you feel teaching this student?

How do you feel when her behavior becomes hostile or disruptive?

- *Strike while the iron is cold:* The best time to discuss these issues with a student is when she is calm. Once a child is wound up, discussion and reasoning may be less effective. At that point, you should consider using de-escalation skills that have been determined effective for that student, briefly stating clear expectations, and using other methods, such as providing diversions or modifying the classroom structure.
- *Do not expect explanations:* Be aware that the student may not be fully aware of why she shows aggression. It is certainly okay to ask, but it is not uncommon for young people to be unsure why they act out. Sometimes, they wish they could stop and feel bewildered by their own actions. Understanding the reasons behind aggression is likely to involve an evaluation that includes information from a number of different sources (the student, colleagues, parents, health care professionals, etc.).
- *Observe your reactions:* Feelings such as fear, helplessness, and anger are a normal reaction to someone else's aggressive behavior. Be aware of any emotional reaction you are having, and use your support system to help you manage these feelings. By doing so, you will put yourself in a position to work more effectively with the student.
- *Maintain expectations:* Set clear and consistent limits, but maintain a calm and compassionate manner. By doing so, you are modeling appropriate assertiveness, which is likely to be an underdeveloped skill for the aggressive child.
- *Describe what you see:* When talking with the student, focus on what you have directly observed and how this affects school performance for the individual as well as other students in the class. Keep a pragmatic approach and avoid

labeling or quickly assuming causes for the behavior. Such an approach will help to minimize defensiveness.

- *Be alert and decisive:* When you see warning signs, act immediately. Attempt to engage the student in some other activity, but emphasize that the purpose of doing so is to help her transition back to classroom expectations.
- *Provide a positive role:* Remember that a student who engages in aggressive behavior may be lacking in basic social skills and self-esteem. The student may also lack a clear sense of a role among her peers other than as a troublemaker or some other negative identity. By attempting to find positive, unique roles for the student (e.g., in charge of leading a class discussion or passing out papers on a certain day), you are helping the student develop a healthy sense of self and find a way to fit in with classroom expectations in a meaningful and productive way.
- *Keep focused on goals:* Remember to stay aware of the goals the student is working toward because it is easy to focus only on the behavior you want the student to avoid. Work with the student to set small, realistic, achievable goals that are incompatible with aggressive behavior. Each time a goal is met, provide praise and verbal reinforcement.

Keep in Mind

- Children with severe problems such as aggressive behavior sometimes appear like they do not care about praise or encouragement. Remember that this can stem from a need to seem tough, the presence of significant insecurity and self-doubt, or uncertainty as to how to internalize or respond to these statements. So, do not lose hope, stay consistent, and remember that positive reinforcement is more effective in changing behavior than is punishment.

COLLABORATING WITH THE FAMILY/CAREGIVERS

Ask Yourself

What are the student's parents/caregivers likely to be concerned about when they receive calls regarding their child's aggression?

What ideas do I have for how to manage this behavior in my classroom, and how can the family help support that plan?

- *Show your concern:* Approach the family with concern for them and the student. Although you may have witnessed acts of aggression or even been the victim of aggressive behavior, try to stay objective and focused on your concern for the student. Show interest in the hardship this behavior is causing them (embarrassment, shame, legal problems). This will go a long way because they may be used to being blamed.
- *Start with positive assumptions:* Work from the assumption that the caregivers want the best for their child, are very concerned about the problem, and are

willing to work with you to address the behavior. It is common to presume that a severe behavior problem must be related to poor parenting or indifferent caregivers, but it is more likely that the caregivers are struggling themselves with how to manage the behavioral problems. Your nonjudgmental approach will help to build a collaborative working relationship.

- *Report facts:* Share the specific problems you are observing in your class. Remember that your primary focus is on specific problems in your classroom rather than on addressing larger family issues or seeking explanations.
- *Seek input:* Ask the caregivers about their concerns and their ideas for improving the situation.
- *Offer to work with the team:* If the caregivers mention other professionals working with the child, offer to speak directly to those individuals to help coordinate the child's care (guardians will probably need to provide written permission to those people).

Keep in Mind

- Showing an understanding that the child's behaviors may be upsetting or perplexing to the family can make it easier for them to collaborate with school staff.

REFERRAL TO AN ADMINISTRATOR, COUNSELOR, OR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Ask Yourself

Is this student posing a danger to himself or herself or to others?

Is her aggression escalating in severity?

Consider such a step when

- The problem involves direct threats, physical violence, or a pattern of more mild aggressive behavior that disrupts your ability to teach. Always follow your school's policies for safety and disciplinary measures.
- You are concerned about the student being hurt outside of your classroom or outside of school. Even if you do not have clear evidence, it does not hurt to talk out your concerns with a school counselor or administrator.

If the student does have professionals in place, keep open communication with them (assuming the student's guardians have signed consent for those people to talk with you). Your efforts will be appreciated because you observe the child more than almost anyone else, and the success of any behavioral intervention is dependent on consistency across settings. In other words, your involvement is critical to the success of a comprehensive treatment program.

Remember that with a problem as severe as this, you should see yourself as a member of a team of professionals who are working with the student and the family. You are an integral part of this team, but do not feel like you can solve this problem on your own.

Keep in Mind

- Because verbal and physical violence can have a strong impact on many people, it never hurts to get a second opinion or to broaden the network of adults who can support the student.

WHAT TO EXPECT

After a particularly challenging day with Maria, you decide to contact her guardians. Her mother starts off by telling you all the efforts she is making to help Maria. You let her know that she is doing a great deal to help Maria, and your hope is that working with her will help Maria in your classroom. It is important to communicate that your concern is for Maria, not for finding blame or seeking punishment. You share with her two recent observations of Maria that illustrate your biggest concerns. Maria's mother tells you that Maria is receiving professional services outside of school, and they are planning a meeting with the school counselor. She invites you to attend and states that she will provide Maria's counselor with permission to include you in this meeting.

In preparation for the meeting, you start keeping track of when Maria is engaging in safe behavior and when her behavior is aggressive or threatening. You keep track of details such as the time of day that incidents occur, the scheduled activity at that time, what is going on in the immediate environment, any significant peer or staff interactions before an incident, and any changes in Maria's behavior or demeanor before an incident.

When Maria is not engaging in aggressive behavior, you make it a priority to point out and praise her specific behaviors. When she is calm, you also privately remind her of safety rules in the classroom, and you explain why these are important. You also make a point to emphasize in these discussions how her current behavior demonstrates adherence to these safety rules.

Preparing for the meeting with Maria's treatment providers has made you very aware of the important role you play in helping Maria and of the need for everyone involved to be working on an integrated and well-coordinated plan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is aggression? Must it include hurtful words or physical acts, or can it include subtler behaviors?
2. In your experience, how have aggressive students affected the learning of peers?
3. Do you work in a school in which aggressive acts often occur inside the building? Have news stories about violence in schools affected how you think about your workplace? If so, how do you deal with this?

The following exercise can be used with an entire class or with a small group of students who are showing problems with aggression. You can modify it to suit your particular class or age group. The approach is designed to build awareness of aggression and what the realistic consequences are for the aggressor and for those who are impacted.

AGGRESSION IN SCHOOL: WHY IT IS A BIG DEAL

Depending on your students' age range and time availability, you can begin this activity by setting up a brief skit demonstrating a form of aggression that might occur in class or a subtle form that will spark disagreement about whether it actually is aggression or not.

Ask the Student(s)

What is aggressive behavior?

Allow your students to explain, and then provide feedback. Sample definition: It can be hitting, pushing, yelling, taking something from someone's hands, name calling, or other actions that hurt, frighten, or intimidate others.

How does it affect you if someone acts aggressively toward you?

Allow them to explain, and then provide feedback. Sample responses include hurt feelings, fear, or not wanting to be around that person.

If you use aggression, does it help you get what you want? What do you get?

Allow them to explain, and then provide feedback. Some may chime in and say that it absolutely does get them a place in line, attention from

friends, status in school, an extra snack, etc., and that is right to a point. You can catch the students off guard by agreeing that it might sometimes help them get what they want...but then ask them to follow this logical thought process through.

Other than occasionally helping you get what you want, what else do you get? What are the negative consequences?

Students with aggressive behaviors will often need help and encouragement to follow through with this chain. The idea is to go beyond just disciplinary consequences and to really examine what happens when someone acts with aggression. Ask the students to brainstorm more ideas than is easy for them. If they are giving few answers, ask them to come up with 10 or 15 responses. You can write them on the board.

Examples

- Some students do not want to be around you.
- Peers are more likely to show fear or avoidance than respect or appreciation toward you.
- If you are having a bad day, other students are less likely to ask you about it or to try to help if they think you might be mean to them.
- Family may be disappointed (if not in the aggression itself, then in the suspension, detention, distraction from academics, etc.).
- Of course, there also might be disciplinary consequences.

Do people think about all of these consequences before they act aggressively toward others? What do they think about?

Allow them to explain, and then provide feedback.

What would happen if you chose not to use aggression in a frustrating situation?

Allow them to explain, and then provide feedback. Encourage the students to focus on how they actually benefit by not using aggression. Help them weigh the benefits of acting out versus not acting out. Help steer the discussion to allow students to recognize that the short-term gratification of aggressively acting backfires by substituting short-term gratification for a variety of negative outcomes.

Order Form

ABOUT YOU (write in your specialty and check one field that best applies)

Specialty _____

Birth to Five K-12 Clinical/Medical Personnel 4-year College/Grad. Comm. College/Vocational Association/Foundation Comm. Services

Name _____

Address _____

residential commercial

City _____

State _____

ZIP _____

Country _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

Your list code or savings code (if applicable): _____

Yes! I want to receive e-mail about new titles and special offers. (Your e-mail address will not be shared with any other party.)

We auto-confirm all orders by mail; please provide an email address to receive confirmation of order and shipping.

Qty	Stock #	Title	Price

PAYMENT METHOD

Check enclosed (payable to Brookes Publishing Co.)

Purchase Order attached (bill my institution)
*Add 2% to product total for P.O. handling fee

American Express (15 digits)

Discover (16 digits)

MasterCard (16 digits)

Visa (13 or 16 digits)

Credit card account number _____

Security code (3 or 4 digit code on back of card): _____

Expiration date ____ / ____ / ____ Signature _____

Subtotal	_____
State sales tax (MD and WA*)	_____
(GST) Business tax (CAN only)	_____
P.O. customers: 2% of subtotal	_____
Shipping (see chart below)	_____
Total (in U.S. dollars)	_____

*WA residents: Please add applicable sales tax by region. Sales tax should be calculated based on the total order (including shipping) in U.S. dollars. If sales tax is calculated incorrectly the customer service department will correct it prior to processing your order and the adjusted total will appear on the invoice included with your shipment.

Convenient ways to order:

CALL toll-free 1-800-638-3775 M-F, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET.; **FAX** 410-337-8539;

MAIL order form to: Brookes Publishing Co., P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624:

ON-LINE www.brookespublishing.com

Money-back guarantee! Ordering with Brookes is risk-free. If you are not completely satisfied, you may return books and videotapes within 30 days for a full credit of the purchase price (unless otherwise indicated). Refunds will be issued for prepaid orders. Items must be returned in resalable condition. All prices in U.S.A. dollars. Policies and prices subject to change without notice. Prices may be higher outside the U.S.A.

STANDARD GROUND SHIPPING & HANDLING

(For other shipping options and rates, call 1-800-638-3775, in the U.S.A. and Canada, and 410-337-9580, worldwide.)

Continental U.S.A. territories & protectorates†; AK, HI & PR‡**

For subtotal of Add*

US\$55.00 and under \$6.49

US\$55.01 and over 12%

**Continental U.S.A. orders ship via UPS Ground Delivery.

†U.S.A. territories & protectorates orders ship via USPS.

‡AK, HI, and PR please add an additional US\$12.00. Orders ship via UPS Air.

Please call or email for expedited shipping options and rates.

Canada

For subtotal of Add*

US\$67.00 and under \$9.99

US\$67.01 and over 15%

Orders for Canada are consolidated for shipping twice each month.

For minimum shipping time, please place your orders by the 9th or 24th of each month.

*calculate percentage on subtotal