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PREVENTING INJURIES FROM STUDENT BEHAVIORS

A Health and Safety Tip Sheet for California Paraeducators

Labor Occupational Health Program, University of California, Berkeley
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

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As a special education paraeducator, you play an essential role in supporting teachers and school administrators in meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities. Sometimes, in the course of that work, a student with special needs might become physically aggressive and potentially dangerous, even though that student may not intend to cause harm. For example, a student might bite, kick, punch, or push you or throw an object at you. Knowing how to prevent these types of aggressive behaviors and what to do to protect yourself can reduce your chance of suffering a serious injury.

Prevent Aggressive Outbursts

- **Get additional training** on how to work safely with children who display aggressive behaviors. Look for trainings that teach you how to recognize triggers and act early to avoid an aggressive outburst. Look for training on how to deescalate a situation. Effective training should emphasize the need to support and comfort a student in distress, rather than controlling a student through the use of restraint. You should have the opportunity to practice techniques to protect yourself and a student acting aggressively. See the resources section below for ideas. Substitute paraeducators should also receive training before working with students that have aggressive behaviors.
- **Advocate for teachers to be trained** on how best to work with paraeducators. Communication is important to a successful partnership. Teachers and paraeducators need to agree on their respective roles, lesson plans, schedules, and routines, and how to troubleshoot issues that come up.

* Did you know?

- Paraeducators are more likely to be injured by aggressive student behavior in their first three years of employment.
- Those who work in special education are more likely to be physically assaulted than those who engage in standard classroom teaching.
- In 2015, the incidence rate for “violent” acts, which includes aggressive student behavior, was five times higher for teaching assistants than for teachers.



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- **Develop an action plan in collaboration** with teachers and administrators to minimize the use of physical restraint. This action plan should include training, support from teachers and administrators in deescalating situations, and a process for debriefing after an incident occurs. A plan like this can reduce injuries to staff and the need for physical intervention.
- **Review the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).** A student's IEP may include a Behavioral Intervention Plan that tells you what actions you can take to prevent problem behaviors and what actions you can take when those behaviors occur. Ask the teacher or others if you need help understanding any part of the IEP.
- **Identify triggers early.** Create a behavioral chart to track triggers, behaviors, and consequences. Recognizing triggers can help you create a low-stimulation environment and also help you redirect a student's attention to avoid an aggressive outburst.
- **Call for assistance early.** If you call for assistance as soon as a problematic behavior begins, you may be able to avoid the use of emergency interventions.
- **Understand and address the cause of the problematic behavior.** For example, if a student throws a book because she cannot read it, then focusing on her reading skills may help prevent another incident. If a student does not feel well physically, then respond to that from the start. Addressing underlying issues is critical to preventing aggressive behaviors.
- **Be consistent in managing behavior.** The teacher and paraeducator should use the same methods and use them consistently.
- **Give praise for good behavior.** Praise should be specific and focus on actions or behavior ("Thank you for actively listening to the instructions"), not on characteristics ("You are so smart").
- **Teach alternative behaviors at a moment when the student is calm and open to learning.** When people are in distress, they are not open to learning.



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- **Offer choices.** Redirect a student who is growing distressed by giving positive options.
- **Give corrections directly and immediately.** If possible, give any corrections in private. Tell the student what kind of behavior is unacceptable and what is expected. Help the student learn how to do what is expected.

Be Prepared for Aggressive Outbursts

- **Secure heavy objects.** In certain contexts, it may be necessary to nail down or secure heavy furniture, so that it cannot be pushed or thrown. For example, nail down heavy furniture in a seclusion room.
- **Don't work in isolation.** When you work with a student who has had physical outbursts in the past, be sure that another staff person is in the room or nearby. Find out in advance how to call for help in case of a trigger or aggressive outburst.
- **Dress for success.** Wear comfortable, closed-toe shoes. Do not wear items that can be grabbed, such as big earrings or very loose clothing. Pull long hair back.
- **Consider whether protective equipment is needed.** If an aggressive outburst occurs, you may need to use pillows or other soft objects to block blows, as an alternative to using physical restraint. Personal protective gear such as padded or Kevlar arm sleeves, gloves, and hats may be helpful in certain situations. Personal protective gear should be clean and should not be shared among staff.

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Respond to Aggressive Outbursts

- **Use a “hands off” approach** for severe behavior whenever possible.
- **Remove any potentially dangerous objects.**
- **Separate or clear the room of other students if necessary.**
- **Use a time-out.** In a time-out, students are isolated from stimuli that might reinforce their aggressive behavior. Students can take a time-out at their desks or be removed to a separate area where a staff member is present and monitoring the student. This is different from seclusion, an emergency intervention that isolates students.
- **Use emergency interventions** when there is a clear and present danger of serious physical harm to the student or others and when a less restrictive response will not prevent the harm. Check with your local Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) to find out what emergency interventions are allowed as a last resort. The Behavioral Intervention Plan may also provide guidance.
 - SELPAs typically allow some method of physical restraint to be used as a last resort. Some techniques require multiple staff. Because restraints can pose serious risks to both the student and the staff, restraints should be used only by a properly trained staff person.
 - Seclusion is allowed by some SELPAs. Locked seclusion, however, is prohibited in California. Because seclusion can be very traumatic and students may harm themselves while in seclusion, it is best to use other alternatives if possible. If seclusion is necessary, closely monitor the student and use it for a limited period of time.
- **Do not take it personally.** Student may not be able to control their behavior on their own.



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Report Incidents

- **Write up an incident report in a timely manner.** Check with your local SELPA for specific procedures. Remember that it is important to report incidents even if the student did not intend to harm anyone. It is also important to report incidents even if the injury is not severe.
- **Write up a behavioral emergency report** after the use of emergency interventions. In California, this is a required step, which triggers the IEP team to determine whether further steps are needed to assess behavior or develop more effective interventions.
- **Take time to debrief after an incident.** This is an important way for staff and, when appropriate, the student to process what happened and what can be done to deescalate a situation in the future.
- **Finally, take care of yourself!** Caring for others is stressful and sometimes traumatic. Ask for what you need. Work with teachers and school administrators to create a reasonable workload and a balance between work and life outside work.

Resources for More Information

- Your local Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) provides resources and trainings for paraeducators. The SELPA sets policies, such as the procedures for emergency intervention.
- The Council for Exceptional Children offers webinars and tools for working with children with special needs. <https://www.cec.sped.org>
- The Crisis Prevention Institute provides training and webinars on topics such as defusing difficult student behavior and nonviolent crisis intervention. <https://www.crisisprevention.com>
- Pro-ACT provides training and webinars on many topics including the use of restraint and strategies for minimizing the use of restraint. <https://www.proacttraining.com>
- The Ventura County SELPA's "Training Manual for Special Education Paraeducators/ Instructional Aides" contains worksheets, tools, and advice. It is available online at <http://www.vcselpa.org/Publications/>.
- The Association of Positive Behavior Support provides webinars and case studies on how to develop positive behavior interventions for students. www.apbs.org