

UNDERSTANDING AND
RESPONDING TO

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

A Practical Guide for School Nurses

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OBJECTIVES



Define aggression



Understand behavior function



Recognize warning signs



Identify medical factors



Use prevention & de-escalation



Collaborate & document
effectively

WHY THIS MATTERS

School nurses are often the first point of contact for students exhibiting aggressive behavior. Understanding the causes and knowing how to respond can make a critical difference in outcomes for both students and staff.

WHAT IS AGGRESSION?

Behavior that can cause harm to self, others, or property

Hitting

Kicking

Yelling

**Throwing
Objects**

NOT ALL AGGRESSION IS THE SAME

TOPOGRAPHY

What the behavior looks like
The observable, physical form of the behavior
— what you can see and describe.

FUNCTION

Why the behavior happens
The underlying purpose the behavior serves for
the individual.

Understanding the difference between what it looks like and why it occurs is key to effective intervention.

FUNCTIONS OF BEHAVIOR

Escape

Avoiding or ending an unwanted task, situation, or demand

Attention

Gaining social interaction, recognition, or response from others

Access to Tangibles

Obtaining a desired item, activity, or privilege

Sensory

Achieving internal stimulation or relieving discomfort

ESCALATION CYCLE



WARNING SIGNS

Physical Cues

Pacing, clenched fists, tense posture, restlessness

Verbal Cues

Refusal to cooperate, raised voice, threats

Behavioral Cues

Withdrawal, repeated nurse visits, avoidance

MEDICAL FACTORS

Physical Needs

Pain, fatigue, hunger, or thirst can escalate behavior

Medication

Changes in medication, missed doses, or side effects

Sensory Overload

Overstimulation from noise, light, crowds, or environment

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Calm Environment

Create a quiet, predictable space that reduces triggers

Offer Breaks

Provide structured opportunities to decompress

Neutral Tone

Use a calm, non-confrontational communication style

Reduce Demands

Temporarily lower expectations during escalation

WHAT NOT TO DO

Argue or raise your voice

Escalates the situation and models aggressive behavior

Demand compliance

Increases pressure and resistance

Take behavior personally

The behavior is communication, not a personal attack

DE-ESCALATION

Stay Calm

Regulate your own emotions first

Use Few Words

Short, simple statements work best

Give Space

Allow physical and emotional room

Offer Choices

Provide options to restore a sense of control

SAFETY FIRST

Keep Distance

Maintain a safe physical distance from the individual

Remove Hazards

Clear the area of objects that could cause harm

Follow Protocols

Adhere to your school's safety and crisis procedures

Call for Help

Don't hesitate to involve additional staff or administration

AFTER THE INCIDENT

Allow Recovery

Give the student time and space to calm down fully before re-engaging

Return to Routine

Help the student transition back to normal activities gradually

Avoid Consequences During Escalation

Address behavioral expectations later, when the student is calm and receptive

DOCUMENTATION

Objective Language

Record facts, not interpretations.

Describe what you observed without judgment or emotional language. Stick to measurable, observable details.

ABC Format

Antecedent – Behavior – Outcome

Document what happened before, during, and after the incident to identify patterns and inform interventions.

COLLABORATION

Effective behavior management requires a team approach

Teachers

Share classroom observations and behavior patterns

Parents

Provide home context and reinforce consistency

Behavior Specialists

Develop and guide intervention plans

WHEN TO REFER

Frequent or Severe Aggression

Behavior occurs regularly or poses serious risk to self or others

Safety Concerns

Immediate danger to the student or those around them

Need for Assessment

Professional evaluation required to determine appropriate supports

CASE STUDY

Scenario

A student makes repeated visits to the nurse's office throughout the day. Each time they are sent back to class, they become aggressive — yelling, pushing chairs, and refusing to leave.

What is the function of this behavior?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Behavior = Communication

Every behavior serves a purpose. Look for the message behind the action.

Early Intervention Matters

Recognizing warning signs early can prevent escalation.

Prevention is Key

Proactive strategies reduce incidents more effectively than reactive responses.

QUESTIONS?

Thank you for your time and commitment to student safety.

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