

Inside the School

How to Recognize and Defuse Classroom Aggression

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Special Report

Inside the School

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HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND DIFFUSE CLASSROOM AGGRESSION

Tragedies at Columbine and, more recently, Virginia Tech, have emphasized the need for schools to focus on how to keep their classrooms and campuses safe.

Dr. John Byrnes, founder of the Center for Aggression and Management, researched conventional approaches to aggression, like anger management and conflict resolution, and found that these approaches don't work.

"Conflict resolution is flawed because it presupposes conflict. You're already reacting," Byrnes said. "Anger management is equally as flawed because you and I experience and express the same anger differently."

Instead Byrnes's research focuses on preventing aggression rather than reacting to it. According to Byrnes, if schools and other organizations can measure aggression, they can manage it. Anger Management not only helps schools measure and manage aggression, but also gives them strategies for a safe escape when management fails.

THE ART OF BEING PREPARED

Byrnes has created an aggression continuum that recognizes three stages of aggression: the trigger phase, the escalation phase and the crisis phase.

The trigger phase is where stress and anxiety begin. A trigger can be something like waking up late, finding there is nothing to eat for breakfast and then getting stuck in traffic. If a person doesn't cope with these triggers, he can graduate to the escalation phase.

"Someone who normally is pragmatic and methodical, they've got their act together; today they come in scattered and disjointed," Byrnes said. "They're not coping with something."

According to Byrnes, it's important to get involved prior to the crisis phase, the phase where the aggressor loses control and may attack. The earlier the involvement, the easier it is to defuse the situation

Byrnes distinguishes between primal aggression, an instinctual aggression fueled by adrenaline, and cognitive aggression, calculated aggression fueled by intent.

PRIMAL AGGRESSION

"[Primal aggression] is that connection between aggression, the production of adrenaline, the increase in the heart rate and the resulting body language and behavior that we can all measure," Byrnes said.

The primal aggressor will exhibit scattered thinking and deterioration of fine motor skills at the onset of the escalation phase, leading to the aggressor questioning authority, refusing to comply with requests and culminating with sweating, yelling and threatening people just before he reaches the crisis phase. During

the crisis phase, he loses verbal control and panics into an attack. A primal aggressor sees himself as the victim.

COGNITIVE AGGRESSION

A cognitive aggressor will experience these phases differently, beginning with deception, a lack of empathy and loss of trust. Then he will stop communicating, create distrust of his victim within their community and try to damage his victim's reputation by exposing him publicly. As the aggressor moves into the crisis phase, he becomes tactical and loses any regard for his personal safety. Eliminating his target becomes his main objective.

"The red-faced, ready-to-explode person is what people think of as the only aggressor. They are an aggressor, but they're not the only aggressor," Byrnes said. "Quite the contrary, the intent-driven cognitive aggressor is far more lethal and pervasive in our school systems."

The question is how to implement a system in which schools can observe students' behaviors and step in before it's too late to defuse the situation. Byrnes suggests a process involving sensors, data tracking and a qualified team to evaluate the data collected and determine a course of action.

The sensors can be anyone, according to Byrnes: bus drivers, teachers or staff. This team of sensors should observe the students without engaging them and then pass the information on to a qualified response team, a core group of responders qualified to evaluate this information.

"In this way, these measurable observables are more objective," Byrnes said. "In other words, we're turning what otherwise is a subjective process into an objective process."

Tracking this data will make it easier to see when a law enforcement level officer needs to intervene.

THE ART OF PERSUASION

“If you’re an aggression manager and you’re communicating with an aggressor, you must take 100 percent responsibility for the communication process,” Byrnes said. “Because otherwise the process is too difficult.”

By controlling the communicative process, an aggression manager will be able to pace the aggressor, in other words, steer the aggressor in the right direction. According to Byrnes, the key to pacing the aggressor is trust.

“You trust people who look like you, talk like you, act like you, dress like you, speak like you—in other words, you trust you,” Byrnes said. “You find things in common with that person and you build on those commonalities.”

People seek connections with others, dislike rejection, like recognition, care what others think of them, try to avoid loss, avoid pain more than they seek pleasure and seek control of their lives. According to Byrnes these are commonalities that most people share.

“So if I say to someone, ‘You know, it really upsets me when someone ridicules me in front of my friends also,’” Byrnes said. “What am I doing? I’m instantly connecting with that person.”

Nonverbal pacing can also help an aggression manager gain the aggressor’s trust. Matching the aggressor’s movements, posture, breathing, speech and blinking rate will facilitate trust and give the aggression manager more control.

“The key with these skills [...] is the subject doesn’t know. They don’t realize you’re moving them away from their aggression,” Byrnes said. “The very best convincer is a person who convinces someone away from their aggression and they think it’s their idea.”

Stay calm. According to Byrnes, calm is contagious and so is analytical thinking. By analyzing the situation, an aggressor can move away from emotional, irrational thought and regain quality of judgment.

THE ART OF SAFE ESCAPE

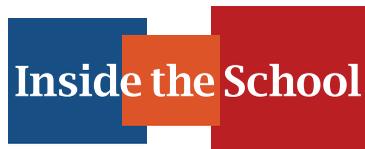
When aggression management fails, school officials need to ensure everyone's safety. School administrators need to manage the environment and have exit strategies. Know where the exits are—including windows and doors. Use codes and signals. Coordinate these strategies with colleagues.

One thing that Byrnes sees as a hindrance to effective environmental management is the placement of the teacher's desk. Often the desk is situated at the end of the classroom, away from the door. A better strategy, according to Byrnes, is to place the desk next to the doors so that the teacher invites students into the classroom

"I hear on a regular basis, teachers telling me their students are coming into their classrooms and already intimidating other students," Byrnes said. "Why? Because they're taking control of the class. We need teachers to take control of their class."

Schools that properly manage aggression will benefit from a healthier learning environment and see safer schools where learning is enhanced, according to Byrnes.

"Think about it. The perpetrator wins because they're not a perpetrator. The victim wins because they're empowered by their skills," Byrnes said. "They're able to engage and prevent it from occurring. And the organization profoundly wins."



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