

Hostile Students

This is a good analysis of the possible background of hostile students, and helpful advice, too. Keep in mind that this is aimed at the K-12 classroom, and that in community college, we have the right to remove the student from the class:

Students who are hostile-aggressive are encountered (and certainly dreaded) by just about every teacher. These are the students classically regarded as “problem students.” They often have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, emotional or behavioral disorders, or are below grade level in achievement. They are capable of dominating and controlling others through intimidation and irrational, often explosive behavior. This blog post looks at the characteristics of the classic hostile-aggressive student, examines reasons for such behavior, and gives suggestions for dealing with such students.

How does the hostile-aggressive student act out?

One can categorize the acting-out behavior of hostile-aggressive students into three general categories: verbal aggression, physical aggression and vandalism. What distinguishes these behaviors as exhibited by the hostile aggressive student is that they are done with intent to do harm, whether that be physical, emotional, or for revenge and retaliation.

Verbal aggression includes defiance, continuous arguing, cut-downs, threats, swearing, bossing, sarcasm and teasing. Physical aggression can be exhibited as kicking, hitting, fighting, spitting, throwing materials with intent to do harm (either to a person or to objects, e.g., a window) and biting, among others. (Be sure to learn as much as you can about the student from his or her file as well as through observation; some of these behaviors could be a result of Tourette’s Disorder.) Vandalism includes not only destruction or damage to property but theft as well.

What causes students to behave this way?

There are many theories as to what causes hostile-aggressive behavior in children. Several of which are especially important to teachers are as follows:

Modeling: Children observe hostile-aggressive behavior modeled by parents, teachers, peers, and in the media. Threats from parents, yelled reprimands from teachers, and violence among peers and in the media are then mimicked by the child.

Peer Reinforcement: Behavior such as fighting is reinforced by peers when they take sides in or cheer for individuals who are fighting. This leads to an increase in hostile-aggressive behavior.

Social Skills Deficit: Children lack the social skills necessary to deal with stressful situations in an assertive rather than aggressive manner. Their repertoire of problem-solving skills is limited to aggression, so they use this to fulfill their needs.

Low Self-Esteem: The hostile-aggressive child acts out of anger. According to researcher J.M. Medick, his reflects poor self-image and an identity of failure “resulting from an inability to satisfy two basic needs: giving and receiving love, and having a sense of worth.” They believe that it is not alright to feel anger and frustration and think they are bad people when they do

have these feelings. Their behavior has led to rejection by both adults and peers, which causes their self-esteem to further plummet.

What causes conflict with the hostile-aggressive student to escalate?

Student frustration triggers hostile-aggressive behavior. Frustration with others or oneself is dealt with through physical or verbal aggression or vandalism. With this behavior, the student gains negative attention from the teacher or peers. The teacher instinctively responds by reprimanding the student or asking him or her to cease the behavior which the student is using to gain attention.

This leads to the next phase of the cycle: student defensiveness. The student begins to lose control and will verbally lash out at the teacher, usually assuming the role of the victim ("You always pick on me," "Leave me alone," "I didn't do anything").

At this point, the teacher is probably angry, confused and wants to re-establish that "the teacher is in control and will be listened to and obeyed at all costs." Through his or her hostile acts, the student has succeeded in getting the teacher to aggress.

The student will now begin to exhibit more hostile-aggressive behaviors until the teacher "lays down the law," which, although it ends the cycle, reinforces the student's belief that he or she is the victim and that adults unfairly take their anger out on students.

The teacher is left with feelings of failure, defeat and confusion, while negative feelings toward the student are reinforced. This leads to the probability that the teacher will respond more quickly and angrily to the student in the future, reinforcing the student's behavior and leading to further deterioration of both student and teacher self-esteem.

What are the typical teacher responses to these behaviors, and how do students react to these responses?

Teachers typically respond in one of two ways: authoritatively or attempting to reason with the student. When teachers respond authoritatively, it is because they feel they have lost control over the situation. Reacting as an authoritarian figure, the teacher gives ultimatums: "You better do what I say or else." The hostile-aggressive student responds by acting as if he or she really does not care what the teacher says or does and continues hostile aggressive behavior, whether physically or verbally: "I hate you! You can't make me do anything." The irony of this is that they are right. You cannot make any student do anything. While reacting authoritatively is an understandable response from the teacher, it is simply ineffective.

The other way teachers typically respond is by attempting to reason with the hostile-aggressive student. They understand that the student's behavior is not a personal attack but indicative of an inferior ability to deal with emotions. This teacher attempts to explain with kindness and understanding what is really going on. However sincere these attempts are, they usually lead to circular arguments, dead ends or resentment from the student. The teacher ends up expending huge amounts of energy and is left feeling frustrated and unsuccessful.

How do I intervene with a hostile-aggressive student?

Identify those behaviors which are inappropriate and perform a functional assessment. Doing an "A-B-C" (antecedent, behavior, consequence) chart can be very helpful in understanding what particular situations tend to set the student off.

Next, examine how you have been dealing with the behavior and evaluate what has been contributing to conflict and whether anything has de-escalated these situations in the past. Drop what is not working and identify any methods which are working. A good rule of thumb is if you are left feeling angry and out of control, your method is ineffective.

After you have evaluated the behavior of both the student and yourself, it is time to put together a proactive intervention plan. This includes outlining proactive behavior modification strategies, reinforcement plans, and teaching new functional behavior which will replace the student's inappropriate ways of dealing with emotion. It can be helpful to hold a conference with the student and, if possible, with the student's parents. Let the student know what is and is not acceptable and how you will help him or her to learn behavior which is appropriate. Using a cue when you sense the student's behavior is escalating can be helpful in teaching the student to be aware of his or her own behavior and to remind the student to use the appropriate behaviors which you have taught.

Stick to and periodically evaluate your intervention. Keep in mind that it took the student a long time to learn these behaviors and it will likely take a long time to replace them with others. Do not let yourself fall into old patterns of reacting angrily.

Let the student know you care about him or her. Make it a point to give the student some brief friendly attention each day. Give the student the opportunity to talk about feelings and give reinforcement. Give the student special responsibilities. This will show that while you do not appreciate his or her behavior, you do see him or her as a worthwhile and capable individual.

It is important that the student learn that it is okay to feel frustrated and angry and that there are acceptable ways of expressing these emotions

What proactive interventions are effective in changing hostile-aggressive behavior?

Positive reinforcement is very important in improving the student's self-esteem and changing his or her self-perception. Modeling and role-playing help the student learn new behavior. Token economies can also be useful in motivating the student to change behavior. Cooperative learning gives students the opportunity to learn from their peers. Self-monitoring and cueing can help a student assume more responsibility for his or her behavior.

How do I avoid being drawn into the conflict or get out of it once I recognize that it is going on?

Remember, these tactics are only to help you avoid or get out of a conflict cycle. They alone will not ultimately change the student's behavior. To do this, you must perform a functional assessment and implement a long-term proactive intervention plan, including techniques such as those listed earlier.

First, you must learn to not allow yourself to be emotionally manipulated. Use self-talk to tell yourself, "I know what the student is doing and why. It is not a personal attack against me, and I will remain calm while trying to help the student."

When you recognize the student is becoming hostile, remember that this stems from frustration. The student needs support. Helping the student to recognize his or her emotions and giving the student the opportunity to deal with them effectively will help. You might have a quiet spot in the room where students can go when they feel that their emotions are getting the best of them.

If the cycle has not been stopped at the frustration stage, you will have to deal with the next stage: defensiveness. At this point, you will need to set limits for the student. For example, if the student has been verbally abusive to another student, you might establish limits in the context of a choice: "Lisa, you need to either quietly continue with your English assignment or put your head down on your desk until you are calm and ready to talk about this." You have defined the limits and left the decision up to the student. You have also stepped out of a conflict cycle by remaining calm.

If the student persists and becomes more aggressive, for example, by beginning to verbally abuse you, you need to provide control. Say, "Lisa, come with me," leave the room, and wait for her to follow. Do not give her the opportunity to argue with you and escalate the conflict further. When you are alone, you could tell her, "Your behavior is unacceptable. You can either come and sit quietly in the class or you can sit here in the hall until you are able to control yourself. Either way, I need to attend to the other students in the class. We will talk about this after you have demonstrated that you are in control by either sitting quietly here or in the classroom until I am ready to speak with you."

Once the student has regained control, you will want to take time to talk to her about what occurred and how you can both work to prevent it from happening again.

How will I know that progress is being made in changing the student's behavior?

The ultimate measure is the degree to which the student's behavior is maintained and generalized. The student may begin to behave acceptably in your classroom, but is he or she improving in other classrooms/situations? Often hostile-aggressive students see authority figures as deliberately waiting for them to mess up, as waiting to set them up for failure, and this view can hinder progress. It can be confronted by having a private conference with the student. You may begin by talking about all the progress and positive change you have seen. Let the student know that you see that he or she can continue to have more and more success, but that this will be difficult if teachers, etc., are seen as enemies and treated suspiciously. Engage the student in a conversation about what generally happens to students (or people in general) who do and do not cooperate with teachers and other authority figures and rules. Remain calm and courteous so that you display the fact that you do care and that you do want the student to succeed. Finally, let the student know that it is up to him or her to decide whether to take this final step. Do not expect the student to make a decision then and there. It may take time, so continue to be caring and courteous, modeling a friendly authority figure.

Not every student will make that final leap and it is something which only the student can decide. Continue to be consistent in dealing with the student and do not hold yourself responsible for the student's decisions. Remember that there are many other areas in the student's life (home, friendship, etc.) which exert great influence over the student and over which you have no control.

One thing you can continue to do, no matter what, is to work with the student to build their self-esteem. This may help the student to choose to see authority figures as people who can help and to see him- or herself as worthy and entitled to this help. Positive reinforcement, being given special responsibilities in the classroom, and tutoring peers are all ways to help build student self-esteem.

Other issues in dealing with hostile-aggressive students

First, as you get to know a student and he or she begins to make progress, there may be times when the student appears to be behaving in a hostile fashion, but closer observation reveals that he or she is following through with what has been requested. For example, Josh has knocked all of his books on the floor in frustration and you have said, "Josh, that is not acceptable behavior. If you want help, raise your hand. In the meantime, please pick up your books." Josh retorts, "You're always picking on me. I hate this stupid class and I hate you, too!" But you observe that Josh is, in fact, picking up his books. This is a time to ignore his outburst, let him pick up his books, cool off, and talk about it later.

Second, never corner a student who is emotionally out of control. Leave a student who is out of control with a large personal space and a way out of the room. Running out of the room is much more appropriate than hitting a teacher.

Finally, do not argue with students. Give choices and the option to discuss an incident later, but do not argue. These are not the same. Discussion leads to collaborative solutions while arguments lead to defensiveness.

(cehs)

There are other resources that give advice on handling students who are escalating the situation. This one is short and direct on how the teacher can act.

Remain Calm.

Remember, the verbally escalating person is beginning to lose control. If the person you're intervening with senses that you're losing control, the situation will escalate. Try to keep your cool, even when challenged, insulted, or threatened.

Isolate the Individual.

Onlookers, especially those who are the peers of the verbally escalating person, tend to fuel the fire. They often become cheerleaders, encouraging the individual. Isolate the person you're verbally intervening with. You will be more effective one-on-one.

Keep It Simple.

Be clear and direct in your message. Avoid jargon and complex options.

Watch Your Body Language.

Be aware of your space, posture, and gestures. Make sure your nonverbal behavior is consistent with your verbal message.

Use Silence.

Ironically, silence is one of the most effective verbal intervention techniques. Silence on your part allows the individual to clarify and restate. This often leads to a clearer understanding of the true source of the individual's conflict.

Use Reflective Questioning.

Paraphrase and restate comments. By repeating or reflecting the person's statement in the form of a question, you'll help the individual gain valuable insight.

Watch Your Paraverbals.

Any two identical statements can have completely opposite meanings, depending on how the tone, volume, and cadence of your voice are altered. Make sure the words you use are consistent with voice inflection to avoid a double message.

(cpi verbal intervention)

It is possible that a student might bring a weapon into the situation, and we need to know how to react to that, too.

Despite our best efforts at prevention, incidents involving weapons can occur. These are dangerous emergency situations that are best left to professionally trained law enforcement personnel. But, if you ever find yourself trapped with a person who has a weapon, here are some key points to keep in mind before professional assistance arrives.

Take a deep breath, remember the importance of the CPI Supportive StanceSM*, and:

- Step back.
- Remain calm.
- Make a plan.

If a weapon is involved in a crisis incident or if a threat involves actual, potential, or perceived weapons, invoke your organization's policies and procedures for responding, while keeping in mind CPI's Four Priorities for Violence Response Procedures.

These could be some of the most important steps during any crisis response. Complex and horrific crises may surprise us, and "remain calm" may be the last thought that comes to mind. Taking a step back physically and emotionally will help crisis response team members remain calm and:

- Keep yourself safe.
- Assess the situation.
- Summon assistance.

- Make the environment as safe as possible.

Consider any applicable requirements under the laws in specific jurisdictions, other regulations, standards, best practices, or mandates relating to your crisis response team.

Also keep in mind that the presence of a weapon does not necessarily indicate the probability of violence.

Some jurisdictions may allow some individuals to carry concealed or unconcealed weapons but may also give employers or facility owners the right to prohibit the presence of weapons within a building or work context. Please consult with applicable policies, procedures, regulations, and laws within your jurisdiction for proper guidance on these issues.

If you are confronted by a person who has a weapon, keep in mind that a person who threatens you with a weapon hasn't necessarily decided to use it.

If the person senses that you're losing control, their behavior will most likely escalate. So keep the following tips in mind until professional assistance arrives:

- **Take threats seriously.** If anyone communicates any possibility of using a weapon against you, assume that they have one even if you can't see it or verify it immediately.
- **Step back.** Try to negotiate permission to take at least three steps away from the individual. If allowed, the increased distance can reduce both anxiety and weapon accuracy.
- **Avoid reaching for the weapon.** Attempting to disarm a person with a weapon can be extremely dangerous.
- **Focus on the individual rather than the weapon.** When threatened, we tend to focus on the weapon. Shifting your focus to the individual will remind you that the real danger is not in the weapon itself, but in the aggressor's behavior.
- **Negotiate.** Make basic requests to solicit affirmative responses. The more the aggressor says "yes" to you, the less likely the weapon is to be used against you.
- **Buy time.** Time is an asset. The longer you can talk to an aggressive individual, the less likely it is that the weapon will be used.

Perhaps most important of all, remember that any previous interactions will play a critical role in the outcome of an incident involving a weapon. Not all gun violence involves people who know each other. And no one can guarantee that if you treat people well they will never attempt to use a weapon against you. But if you consistently interact with people in a considerate and respectful manner, you are less likely to become a target of violence.

* From what I can find on the web, the stance involves body language that gives the student space, shows them honor as a person, and does not escalate the situation any further.

(cpi weapon)

All good advice. The hard part is remembering it if the problem ever occurs.