



Creating Safe and Supportive Classrooms: A Primer for Elementary Teachers

Contents

01	INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT
04	PURPOSE: PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND DE-ESCALATING AGGRESSION
04	OBJECTIVES
04	DEFINITIONS
07	VIOLENCE AS A SYMPTOM
09	PRINCIPLES UNDERLINING OUR PREVENTION AND DE-ESCALATION APPROACH
11	CREATING NON-VIOLENT CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS: TOOLS TO SUPPORT PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH
14	DE-ESCALATION: THE LANGUAGE TO SAY IT
16	TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSEQUENCES
17	IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL
19	SAFE AND AFFIRMING SCHOOL CULTURE
20	PARTNERING WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS
20	CONCLUSION
21	CASE STUDIES

The Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) is the professional association that represents Ontario’s 160,000+ teachers who are employed in the publicly funded school system. OTF is comprised of four affiliated groups: l’Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA), and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF/FEESO).

OTF’s responsibilities include promoting and advancing the cause of public education, raising the status of the teaching profession as well as promoting and advancing the interests of teachers. OTF also represents teachers and all other members of the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan in the administration of the Plan and management of the pension fund, and acts as the link between teachers and the Ontario Ministry of Education.



01

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OTF extends its deepest gratitude to the teachers who shared their stories, wisdom of experience and research expertise on violence prevention and intervention. Their voices echo throughout this primer.

Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to the contributions and support of OTF's Affiliates:

- Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)
- Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
- Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)
- Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO)

Reports and resources on violence prevention and intervention from the Affiliates are shared at the end of this Primer.

We are also indebted to our three writers, whose extensive expertise led to the creation of this resource:

- Mohini Athia
- Randa Meshki
- Kathryn Penwill

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Teachers and school staff should not have to face violence and aggression in their workplaces. All school community members deserve to work free from violence and its impacts. Our collective goal is to prevent school-based violence in all its forms and contexts.

OTF acknowledges that school-based violence is an issue of workplace safety for teachers and other education sector workers. Teachers and education workers have the right to work in schools that are safe and secure, and they cannot be expected to compensate for the lack of available support and resources in schools.

Teachers who are experiencing significant frustration about violence in schools, both among and from students, sometimes take the difficult decision to leave the profession temporarily or permanently. Those who remain may feel



If you or a colleague are experiencing or witnessing workplace violence, you should contact your union immediately for support and for guidance on your right to refuse unsafe work. You can find information about the steps you need to take in the resources created by OTF's Affiliates (AEFO, ETFO, OECTA and OSSTF/FEESO), which are listed in the section of this Primer titled *If You Have Experienced Violence in Schools*.

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“Give kids a specific duty, make them responsible for something in the classroom—when kids are responsible for something they will feel accountable to others”



02

undermined by weak, or lack of any, consequences for violations of conduct. It is not uncommon for teachers to feel unsupported when they do experience or witness violence, discouraged by the repetition of the same violent behaviour or daily incidents, uncertainty as to who will address the violence, and the erosion of respect in general for teachers and schools.

Section 264(1)(e) of the *Education Act* bestows on teachers the responsibility to “maintain, under the direction of the principal, proper order and discipline in the teacher’s classroom and while on duty in the school and on the school ground.” Unfortunately, we are increasingly

seeing the normalization of school-based violence. This trend is part of a broader context, characterized by a societal erosion of respect for institutions (such as schools) and, consequently, the erosion of respect for teachers.

As school-based violence is a systemic issue with systemic causes, it needs systemic solutions. Schools are not insulated from societal pressures. They are a microcosm of society at large and, as such, all the issues and tensions that create and impact Ontario cultures and societies, also shape and colour our school cultures and climates. Given the serious issues people are facing, such as discrimination, family violence,

economic insecurity, war, poverty, homelessness, and many others, violence in schools can be a symptom of societal and systemic inequities impacting young people and their families.

Teachers are not social workers or psychologists and cannot be expected to take on the work of clinically trained professionals who have received in-depth training on student mental health and trauma. Nor can teachers be expected to remedy societal ills or resolve tensions and conflicts that emanate from the broader society. Furthermore, as members of the same society, teachers themselves may experience the same types of distress.

Teachers feel the tension between their rights to a safe workplace, the rights of students experiencing/witnessing violence, and circumstances impacting students who perpetrate violence. The tension is taut because these rights may appear to be in competition with one another.

OTF recognizes this tension and believes it is imperative to support teachers, who are facing these realities through no fault of their own, by providing hands-on tools for addressing violence, even before it erupts, and for de-escalating aggressive confrontations whenever appropriate.

Addressing school-based violence requires a multi-level approach, involving all stakeholders. While we understand that a comprehensive whole-school and whole-community approach is needed, providing this is clearly beyond the purview of this resource. Rather, we focus on immediate strategies, enabling teachers and support staff to respond effectively to acts of aggression and to pre-empt violence at school, while attending to their own well-being, safety and dignity, as well as that of their students.

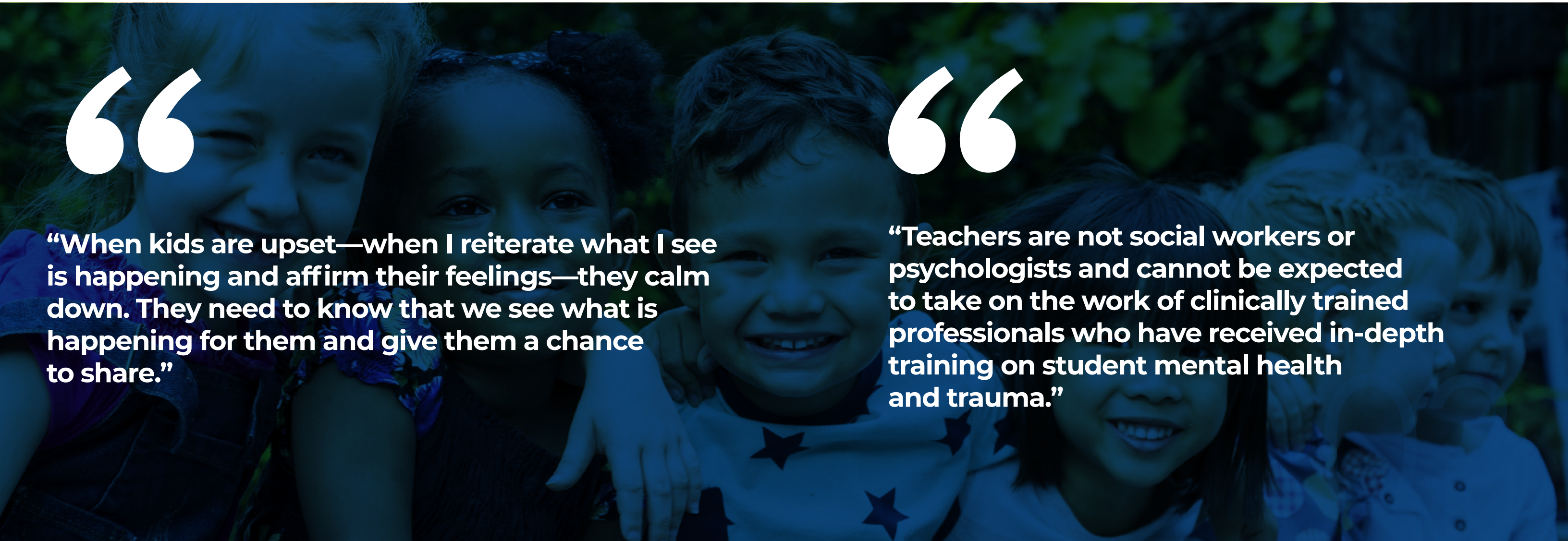
03

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“When kids are upset—when I reiterate what I see is happening and affirm their feelings—they calm down. They need to know that we see what is happening for them and give them a chance to share.”

“

“Teachers are not social workers or psychologists and cannot be expected to take on the work of clinically trained professionals who have received in-depth training on student mental health and trauma.”



PURPOSE: PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND DE-ESCALATING AGGRESSION

This primer provides teachers with hands-on tools to help pre-empt violence before it surfaces in our classrooms and to de-escalate aggression.

- Explored in this resource are:
- definitions of violence and aggression
 - violence as a symptom in society
 - principles underlying our approach to violence prevention and de-escalation
 - tools for prevention and de-escalation
 - de-escalation: the language to say it
 - trauma informed consequences
 - resources for staff who have experienced violence
 - safe and affirming school cultures
 - partnering with parents and caregivers
 - case studies

Discussions on the themes above will focus on student-on-student aggression and student-on-school staff violence. Teachers and educators are also experiencing aggression from parents/caregivers and others in the school and larger community, but these issues go beyond the scope of this primer and will therefore not be explicitly addressed here.

OBJECTIVES

Providing teachers with support in building their capacity and confidence to respond skilfully when faced with incidents of student aggression in classrooms and schools is imperative. Opportunities for shared reflection with

colleagues on the core issues, causes and dynamics at play during such occurrences can equip teachers to prepare an effective approach to intervention.

This primer is not a prescriptive or exhaustive how-to list of rules or answers that teachers must use to prevent or intervene in violent situations. Nor does it delve into school board-specific processes and procedures related to school policies and codes of conduct, all of which are more appropriately addressed directly through contact with your teacher union.

This resource provides concrete tools, strategies and language grounded in a values-based vision of a systemic approach to prevention and intervention. It is hoped that teachers and other educators can use these ideas to expand on the exemplary practices and strategies they may already use every day in classrooms and schools.

We know that prevention is key, through building non-violent classrooms, school cultures and relationships. It is also true that progressive and non-violent crisis intervention, grounded in a humane and compassionate approach, can help to de-escalate and alleviate pressures that often lead to further violence.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this primer, we use the definitions of violence set out in *Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA):

- Section 1(1) of OHSA provides the following definitions, which are central to understanding and addressing violence in schools:
- **Workplace violence:** the exercise of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or

could cause physical injury to the worker, an attempt to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker, a statement or behaviour that it is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force against the worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker.

- **Workplace harassment:** engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace, including virtually through the use of information and communications technology, that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, or (b) workplace sexual harassment ([Safer Schools Now—OSSTF/FEESO Policy Paper on Building Safer School Communities](#)).
- **Workplace sexual harassment:** engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace, including virtually through the use of information and communications technology, because of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, where the course of comment or conduct

is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, or making a sexual solicitation or advance where the person making the solicitation or advance is in a position to confer, grant or deny a benefit or advancement to the worker and the person knows or ought reasonably to know that the solicitation or advance is unwelcome.

While the OHSA definitions are useful, expanded definitions are also important. These would ensure the recognition and inclusion—as forms of workplace violence—of physical harm that does not require medical attention, as well as psychological, emotional, mental, spiritual and other forms of violence. Aggression and violence are closely linked. Often, behaviour that begins as aggression may escalate into acts of violence.



“Remember they are witnesses too—they need support as well.”



“

“With some kids you can talk to them right away about what has happened and reason or repair but other students you need to give them time and come back to it later in the day or the next day—you must know your students.”

In a school context, aggression can be defined as any behaviour that violates school expectations, policies or norms and that is intended to cause harm (impulsive or planned), discomfort, or distress to another person (peer, adult), disruption of safety, the learning environment or emotional well-being. This behaviour may manifest as:

- **verbal**—insults, name calling, threatening language, yelling
- **physical**—hitting, kicking, pushing, tripping, throwing or destroying objects
- **relational**—damaging relationships, excluding, manipulation, rumours, defiance, non-compliance

In addition to the above definitions, an awareness of bullying as a unique form of violence that is often prevalent in schools is critical. For a fulsome examination of bullying prevention and intervention, please see [OTF's Professional Learning Module](#) addressing bullying prevention and associated [Resources](#) on the [Safe@School website](#).

VIOLENCE AS A SYMPTOM

There have been numerous investigations and reports describing the recent increases in incidents of school-based violence in Canada. A summary of these findings and links to pertinent studies have been assembled by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) as part of its Stop Violence in Schools initiative. Sadly, the phenomenon of witnessing or experiencing violence in schools has become the normalized experience of far too many teachers. A short list of additional resources for those seeking support or who are interested in reading further has been provided at the end of this primer.

While it is not possible to exhaustively list all causes of the increasing levels of violence in schools, we do know that the following realities have had an impact:

- the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath;
- social media usage and content absorption;
- growing economic inequality due to job losses, precarious employment etc.;
- a sense of hopelessness and despair around global and Canadian politics;
- artificial intelligence;
- fear of an uncertain economic future;
- youth unemployment;
- lack of support services and cuts to education, health care and social services;
- less funding for special education and mental health needs of students.

Understanding the depth and breadth of these factors helps us to comprehend what is happening in schools.

Violence is often an expression of power imbalances.

In schools, as in society, there are systemic and structural power imbalances or interpersonal abuses of power, or a combination of these. Young people are especially vulnerable to abuse and violence—they have insufficient information, resources and experience, can feel a sense of isolation and are dependent on adults. Not only do young people experience violence from adults, but they may also mimic adult violence in their interactions with peers to gain a sense of power.

Whether they see this adult violence at home, at school, in community organizations, in sports, online, in the world at large or in other communal spaces, young people have too often observed that power can be wielded to abuse others, rather than seeing instances of personal and collective power used for good. However, as we know, abuse of power is never ok—whether the perpetrator is a child or an adult or has another form of societal advantage.

Schools are places that represent a structure with implicit imbalance of power, with teachers, principals and

other educators de facto acting as authority figures.

While we may understand the pressures leading children and youth to lash out against authority, this does not imply that we should accept behaviour that is detrimental to the well-being of the human beings who make up the school community. The normalization of violence within our schools is deeply harmful to the preservation of everyone's humanity and dignity and of the societal norms that allow students to grow up with a sense of agency and security.

Why is an understanding of power imbalance significant? Aggression and violence (student-to-student or student-to-staff) cannot be normalized or allowed to continue unaddressed. Awareness of power imbalances can help us contextualize behaviours and actions and help us, as teachers, to reflect on and interrogate the strategies we might harness to respond to students showing aggressive behaviours or acting violently.

PRINCIPLES UNDERLINING OUR PREVENTION AND DE-ESCALATION APPROACH

This primer takes a trauma-informed approach, which recognizes that past experiences of violence in and out of schools impact students' present-day behaviours. The goal

is to prevent re-traumatization by creating (or co-creating when appropriate) the conditions or climate that support safety, trust, and a sense of agency in all interactions with students.

We propose these values-based guidelines to violence prevention and de-escalation, strengthening or integrating the following beliefs and values into our classroom practice:

1. **Power:** Modelling and cultivating positive uses of power and privilege; growing individual and collective leadership capacity can build agency.
2. **Empathy:** Building empathy and understanding—for self, colleagues, students, families—even as judgment arises.
3. **Non-violence:** Establishing a stance of non-violence that respects others' rights, that values peace and problem solving, and that avoids the use of force.
4. **Empowerment:** Fostering empowerment by validating experiences and restoring a sense of power and agency.
5. **Awareness:** Developing deep awareness of issues, of feelings and of emotional responses—both our own and others'—even when that awareness creates discomfort.
6. **Presence:** Acknowledging and recognizing what is happening (both in the moment and more broadly) and naming the problems, behaviours and action as they arise.
7. **Non-judgment:** Recognizing and avoiding shame and blame of individuals and groups, even while acknowledging and naming problems.
8. **Hope:** Cultivating hope and promoting the idea that positive change is possible.
9. **Responsibility:** Emphasizing personal and collective responsibility; self-reflection is important and enables people to take responsibility for their actions, behaviour, and words.

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“Try to understand the behaviour of students. The behaviour is a method of communication, something is going on and we have to dig and question and put in the effort.”

10

10. **Skill-building:** Focusing on skills (i.e. self-care, self-regulation, communication); violence prevention can focus on skill-building rather than blame or punishment.
11. **Solidarity:** Nurturing solidarity by: emphasizing our common humanity and shared vulnerability; creating connections; encouraging collaboration and cooperation among and between students, and between students and adults (intergenerational, intragenerational) and between employee groups and staff.

“

“We can be more compassionate, respectful to students AND have the students be accountable in line with the amount of cognition they have at that age or in that situation.”

CREATING NON-VIOLENT CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS: TOOLS TO SUPPORT PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

It is helpful for teachers and educators to develop and model skills and beliefs that foster physical, mental and emotional health, and to guide students to do the same.

Promoting this approach is a valuable violence prevention tool for both staff and student safety.

The following steps provide a structured way to identify, assess, and regulate both our own and our students' emotions for greater empathy, clarity, cooperation and well-being.

STEP 1 *Name and accept the emotion*

Accept reality and our emotions:

Identify what you are feeling, or what the student is feeling, in a calm and non-confrontational way—sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger, fear, disappointment, shame etc. Remember that feelings may not be facts, but they ARE important information.

As things continue to change rapidly—in education, globally, in our society—it can be very overwhelming. We can find balance between protecting our own personal space and boundaries and concern for students in our care.

STEP 2 *Measure the intensity*

Rate the intensity of the emotion or mental state on a scale of 0–10:

- 0–3: mild
- 4–6: moderate
- 7–10: severe

This can help determine the type and level of urgency of the response needed.



...it is imperative for all of us to be familiar with, and to adhere to, school and board policies, protocols and procedures regarding student behaviour and student-teacher interactions.

Notice escalating behaviours:

- Escalation of your own or students' behaviours is significant information.
- Escalating behaviours can include questioning/arguing, non-compliance, defiance/confrontation, signs of aggression.

Avoid arguing or trying to reason with a student who is showing signs of escalation.

STEP 3 *Identify triggers*

Ask: “What caused this feeling?”

- Examples: social media, news, reading or hearing something difficult, a conflict with peers, feeling unsafe, a memory, lack of sleep, hunger, tiredness, a feeling of disconnection, etc.
- Be knowledgeable about potential triggers, de-escalation strategies (see De-escalation: The Language to Say It in the next section), and emergency procedures for individual students who have a history of violent behaviours.
- If you are an occasional teacher, ask if there are safety plans for any of the students.

11

STEP 4 *Identify needs*

Determine what you or students need in the moment to feel supported and safe.

- Examples: reassurance, feeling safe, feeling confident, understanding, a calm space, time out, opportunity to speak to someone, needing water.

STEP 5 *Recognize internal resources (strengths)*

Identify the personal strengths or skills that can be used to manage the emotion or mental state:

- Examples: self-awareness, situational awareness, problem-solving, self-control/-regulation, patience, empathy, courage, or reflection skills.

“Use natural consequences instead of ‘you can’t go to recess’—they need to move their bodies!”



STEP 6 *Recognize external resources (supports)*

Identify external strategies or supports that can be used to regulate the emotional or mental state (yours or your student’s). For your own self-regulation, you may consider pursuing one or more of the following options, once you have completed your workday:

- Talking to or calling someone you trust.
- Practicing intentional breathing or deep breathing: inhale five seconds, exhale five seconds, repeat until calm.
- Journaling, reading, writing, drawing, art, listening to music.
- Watching a comedy movie or video.
- Thinking of a pleasant memory.
- Taking a power nap (e.g., 20 minutes) or nourishment (food, water, etc).
- Moving your body (walk, stretch, exercise).
- The above strategies may also be useful to recommend to your students.

STEP 7 *Choose and apply a resource*

Similar to the pre-flight safety instructions on airplanes that advise putting on your own oxygen mask before putting one on your child, as teachers, we need to attend to our own distress before we can effectively respond to our students’ distress.

Pick one internal resource and one external resource to take immediate action to regulate your own emotions:

- Example: Use patience (internal) and take deep breaths (external) to calm yourself before responding to a student.

When things are calm, consider creating a compilation of strategies together with your students that they can try. If one option doesn’t work at a particular time, encourage students to try another!

DE-ESCALATION: THE LANGUAGE TO SAY IT

In this section you will find some ideas for language and approaches that you may already be using or could add to your practice to de-escalate incidents of aggression and to prevent violent outbursts/actions.

First and foremost, as employees of a school board, it is imperative for all of us to be familiar with, and to adhere to, school and board policies, protocols and procedures regarding student behaviour and student-teacher interactions.

Beyond this, the knowledge we have about our students’ identities and backgrounds and the quality of our relationship with our students will, of course, inform the language we use and the approach we take to pre-empt and de-escalate violence. When a student’s background is not known to us, the approach we take will be informed and guided solely by the code of conduct and protocols set out by the school administrator. When a student’s background is known (e.g., they have a special education identification or we are aware that they come from an environment where they have experienced violence), then a safety plan detailing a response should additionally be in place.

The above notwithstanding, we have attempted to the extent possible to provide in the following paragraphs some approaches that can be applied to all students (whether you work with them closely or not) and can be used to support all those involved—those experiencing or witnessing harm, and those causing it.

Students need clear limits. That said, teachers can consider whether a student’s aggressive behaviours may be a way of communicating, a reaction to injustice they have experienced or could be a part of their learning or mental health needs. Just as vital as intervention strategies is the follow-up to repair or re-establish positive relations with

those involved, as well as possible awareness raising, exploration and/or discussion with the whole class.

Validate emotions

“It sounds like you are feeling <frustrated, angry, disappointed...>”

“Your feelings and what you’ve been through are important.”

Create emotional safety

“I am here to listen without blaming or shaming. Would you like to talk about what happened?”

“It takes a lot of courage to share what you experienced. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I know it can be <stressful ... challenging> to ... <change schools, come from another province/territory ... immigrate/flee from another country”

Reduce self-blame and blaming others

“It is not your fault that the adults decided to separate. That decision does not mean your parents don’t love you.”

“It is not your fault that you had to experience war and be a witness to cruelty. I hope you can find safety here without blaming or hurting others. I’m here to support you.”

“Adult decisions are made by adults, sometimes to keep people safe.”

Support accountability and reflection without shame

“You are not responsible for your parents’ decisions or anyone else’s choices.”

“You ARE responsible for your own actions. Even when you feel angry or frustrated, you do not have the right to hurt others.”

“You are not responsible for what happened in your country. Here, you have the right to be safe and your voice matters. We don’t meet violence with violence; there are other ways you can respond to violence. It is important to use words or express your emotions without hitting or yelling at anyone.”

“We can discuss strategies for you and others to be safe.”

Teach safe coping strategies

“You have choices when you feel overwhelmed/angry/upset. You can express your emotions (e.g., anger) safely by talking to someone you trust, writing or journaling, going for a walk, exercising until you feel calmer, listening to music, or explaining how you felt when the situation happened.”

“Your body has the right to be safe. Nobody should touch you without asking permission to do so. We call it consent. You also have the responsibility to ask others if they want to be touched. Without asking, you will be responsible for others not feeling safe, and there are consequences if you don’t respect others’ rights.”

Provide choices while creating and reinforcing boundaries

Clearly, and using non-emotive language, give the student a choice of behaviour with clear consequences. “You can return to your seat so that we can finish our work and go to recess; if you choose not to return to your seat, you will need to leave the classroom.”

Make sure that you allow time for students to process the information, consider their choices and to respond. “Take a minute to consider what you would like to do and then let me know.”

Give the student space by reducing interactions between the student and the rest of the class. “Where would you like to take some alone time in the classroom? You can spend some time drawing, sitting, writing or working on something else for now.”

If it appears likely that verbal de-escalation may be unsuccessful, make sure that the rest of the class has a clear exit route.

Collaborate rather than control (de-escalation)

“Let’s make an agreement together to work on your behaviour and check in regularly to see what support you need.”

“Can we pause for a moment and then think together about how to solve this?”

Remember that for all the students exhibiting inappropriate behaviour due to mental health struggles, learning challenges, difficult emotions or lack of skills, there are also many others who are struggling in silence. There may be students who are experiencing depression or anxiety without causing “problems” or disruptions, and who are trying to be invisible.



...it is essential to comply with school and board policies regarding acceptable student behaviour and discipline procedures.



... we should always consult with our union



...strongly recommend that you contact your union immediately for support and for guidance on your right to refuse unsafe work

TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSEQUENCES

As noted earlier in this primer, it is essential to comply with school and board policies regarding acceptable student behaviour and discipline procedures. There are many instances where existing laws/policies dictate disciplinary actions that are outside a teacher’s discretion and that more appropriately belong to an administrator. You will want to take care not to pursue actions that run counter to these policies.

Moreover, as employees, we should always consult with our union regarding safety thresholds and making sure that we know the processes we need to follow if we experience violence from students or others. In such situations, we again strongly recommend that you contact your union immediately for support and for guidance on your right to refuse unsafe work.

The above notwithstanding, one approach that can be used to emphasize prevention and to de-escalate aggression is progressive discipline. It is possible to identify and use consequences that foster learning, as opposed to punishment that inflicts pain for those who engage in aggressive behaviour, as illustrated in the following guidelines:

- Make an effort not to exclude the student who has done the harm from school activities like recess, special trips and activities.
- Shape behaviour by helping students recognize the impact of their actions on themselves and their community (talking circles, restorative practices).
- Build students’ capacity to manage strong emotions and to self-regulate (e.g. naming and expressing emotions; finding non-aggressive outlets for nervous energy).

Make a plan with the student who has caused harm on how they will repair the situation, let them review and assess as many options as possible, make a choice for a first step and then follow up in an ongoing supportive way, not “one and done.”

Understand that behaviour change is slow and incremental for everyone, and allow for additional chances for repair.

While this section has focused on approaches to progressive discipline with the student who has behaved violently, it is equally important to meet with any student who was the target or a witness of such violence. We refer you to OTF’s [Professional Learning Module addressing bullying prevention](#) and associated [Resources](#) on the [Safe@School website](#), for more information about approaches to intervention with students who are targeted by violence or bullying.

IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

As stated from the outset of this primer, teachers and school staff should not have to live with violence in their workplaces. School-based violence is an issue of workplace safety.

The following strategies can guide you in coping with this difficult experience.

- Contact your local and/or district union officer for support to know your rights.

- Know your rights and responsibilities when it comes to following incident reporting procedures at the school and school board policies.
- Understand the processes of how to take medical and other leaves of absence, if necessary,
- Investigate the possibility of submitting WSIB claims following an incident of violence against you.
- Following an incident of violence, keep handwritten notes in a notebook in pen in case of a future legal process.
- Ensure you access mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health supports to recover.



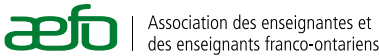
School-based violence is an issue of workplace safety



Know your rights and responsibilities when it comes to following incident reporting procedures at the school and school board policies.



The following resources may support you in coping with a situation of workplace violence:



- [Dire non à la violence](#)
- [Plan d'action provincial pour contrer la violence dans les milieux scolaires de l'AEFO](#)
- [L'AEFO lance son microsite sur la violence en milieux scolaires : un outil centralisé pour agir avec assurance](#)



- [Workers Rights Resources](#)
- [Workplace Health and Safety Resources](#)



- [Workplace Violence and Harassment Against Teachers: Results of a comprehensive members survey June 2017](#)
- [Safer Schools for All Addressing Violence and Harassment Against Teachers: Report September 2017 SAFER SCHOOLS FOR ALL](#)

- 2026 Report: Violence in Classrooms is Rising, The System is Under Strain
[A System Under Strain: Violence and Harassment in Ontario Schools](#)



- [Startling OSSTF/FEESO school violence survey results reveal need for emergency funding - 2023](#)
- [SAFE AT SCHOOL OSSTF/FEESO White Paper on Building Safer School Communities January, 2025](#)

Additional resources:



- [Stop Violence in Schools](#)



- [Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law](#)

SAFE AND AFFIRMING SCHOOL CULTURE

While addressing broader school cultures is not in the purview of this resource, below are a few key look-fors of safe and affirming school cultures:

- Strong collaboration between all or a critical mass of staff in creating a safe, welcoming school environment.
- Trust amongst staff, with an explicit non-violent approach to violence prevention and intervention, as shared in this primer.
- A shared approach amongst staff to expectations for students so that students feel as safe as possible and know transparently the consequences for violence, as well as consistency in follow-through after violence happens.
- Ensuring there is a de-briefing after an incidence of violence amongst staff involved and students involved in appropriate environments and with appropriate

people, engaging in a process of individual repair and community re-building practices.

- Excellent transition planning for incoming students and their needs, including placement in appropriate programs and classrooms.
- Resolving the small problems to prevent the bigger problems—perhaps an anti-violence or safe schools committee for prevention efforts.
- Visual cues, posters and ongoing information about how we can all create and sustain an environment that is kind, caring, problem-solving and empathetic. Please refer to the [Safe@School website](#) resources on [Developing a healthy school culture](#).



PARTNERING WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Parents and caregivers are vital allies. Please review OTF’s Professional Learning Module on the Safe@School website, [Parents and Caregivers; Partners in Prevention](#), as well as [OTF’s Parent Engagement website](#), where there is an extensive array of information, strategies and tools to work together.

As with students, a commitment to building and sustaining positive and healthy relationships with parents, guardians and caregivers is key. When these types of relationships exist, if an intervention is needed after a violent incident, it may be easier for all parties to move forward together. If there is antagonism or push back, we can mitigate it by understanding that parents, guardians and caregivers may have had challenging or traumatic relationships with schooling themselves or may be feeling defensive and judged from previous interactions with schools.

CONCLUSION

As teachers, our experience of a lived sense of the pervasiveness and escalation of violence in schools is grounded in reality. Despite our daily exposure to violence, this phenomenon need not be normalized or generate a sense of powerlessness through a passive perception that this is “just what happens” in the education system.

Individually and collectively, there is hope in creating and sustaining classroom environments in which everyone is safe, supported and thriving. In situations where violence is expressed, there is a wide variety of strategies that teachers and school staff are using, and can continue to use, in order to interrupt, address and repair harm. Our aim and hope in presenting this primer is to propose guidelines, values and language that will strengthen existing practices by continuing to foster compassion, accountability, agency, and positive change.



CASE STUDIES

While the following case studies are illustrative of real scenarios (names have been changed), they are not an exhaustive portrait and are designed to offer opportunities for individual and collective reflection.

As you review these case studies, remember that you are not expected to take on the role of a trained social worker or psychologist. You should always reach out to your administrator to request the support of qualified personnel for students who are behaving violently due to psychological and/or social factors.

We can maintain a mindset of curiosity and empathy while ensuring support for everyone involved in incidents of violence—those causing harm, witnessing it and experiencing it directly. In some cases, you may also be intervening in situations of violence with students you do not know well. The same mindset can be maintained. Ensuring workplace safety for all staff is a must, too.

If you or a colleague are experiencing or witnessing workplace violence, you should contact your union immediately for support and for guidance on your right to refuse unsafe work.

Case Study 1: Roshton

12-year-old **Roshton** is in Grade 6 and spends much of his time playing video games late into the night without his parents knowing, and as a result is extremely tired at school.

During the school day, Roshton falls asleep in class and becomes irritable and even aggressive to students and staff if someone disturbs him. The school has contacted his parents to address this concern.

What could you do in this situation to support Roshton and his parents?

- Suggested strategies and guidelines:
- Work with Roshton to understand the impact of his device use, sleep deprivation on his well-being and behaviour. Together come up with ideas to take accountability without shame.
 - Collaborate with Roshton to take on leadership roles within the classroom, have him take on concrete



responsibilities that make him accountable to peers.

- Support Roshton's parents to engage in physical activities with Roshton at home, share ideas with them and inform them about physical activities at school that they may want to follow up on.

Case Study 2: Mikael

Mikael is a 9-year-old student in Grade 4 who was adopted at a very young age along with his two sisters. He has been sexually abused and made to see pornographic websites. At school, Mikael has begun touching peers and adults inappropriately.

Despite psychological support, the involvement of a social worker, and child protection services, Mikael becomes physically aggressive when adults intervene to stop him from touching himself or others. He is generally described as a kind and pleasant child; however, his behaviour becomes disruptive in these situations. He reacts violently when he perceives adults are looking at him harshly or when he is punished.

Mikael does not understand what he has done wrong or why he is being punished.

What could you do to address this situation effectively, while ensuring safety for yourself and others?

Suggested strategies and guidelines:

- Self-regulate as a teacher and approach Mikael with compassion and calm, even as there is a history of physical and sexual aggression.
- Collaborate on choices of action Mikael can take when agitated, while creating boundaries and accountability without shame.
- Emphasize safety, consent, and rights while respecting other people.

Case Study 3: Milo and Riko

Twins **Milo** and **Riko** are 10 years old and in Grade 5. Little is known about the home situation, other than that the mother is separated from the children's father.

The twins are in the same classroom and frequently engage in physical fights with each other. When adults attempt to separate them, both twins hit the adults and throw objects at them. Milo and Riko are followed by a social worker to support emotional regulation.

They suggested separating the twins to reduce tension; however, separating the twins did not resolve the problems.

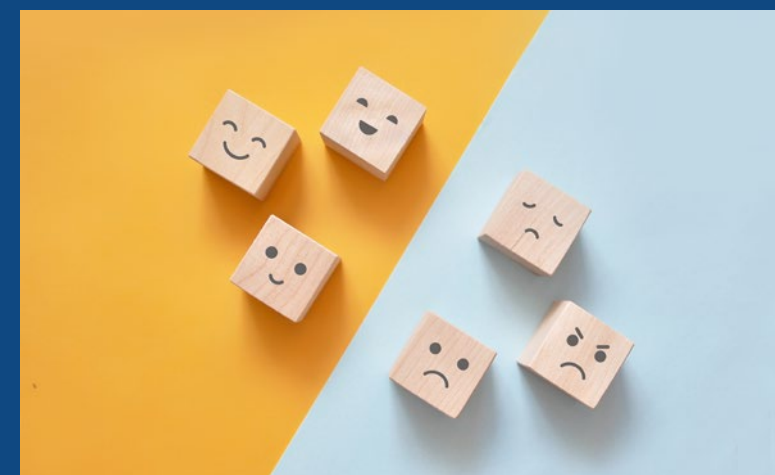
Since being separated, the twins have begun hitting classmates regularly. When one twin learns that his brother has been punished by adults or hit by peers, he leaves his classroom and physically assaults the person who hurt his brother.

Classroom staff restrain the twins by holding their arms and pressing them against a wall until they calm down. One of the twins disclosed to the social worker that he does not feel safe with the adults in the classroom when he is held against the wall. He reported pain to his chin and stated that being restrained by the arms makes him feel like a criminal.

What could you do to address this situation effectively, while ensuring safety for yourself and others?

Suggested strategies and guidelines:

- Repeating and reinforcing that using violence as a means to solve conflict is not the solution
- Have conversations together about promoting attitudes and behaviours that respect others' rights, value peace, and prioritize problem-solving over the use of force
- As a teacher, we can separate the child from the behaviour by reinforcing that the child is not "bad"; their aggressive behaviour is learned, and we can acknowledge that anger is a natural emotion. Affirm to them that angry outbursts can be unlearned with guidance and practice.



Case Study 4: Mushi

An 8-year-old child, Mushi, was emotionally and physically abused by her mother when she was 3 years old. The parents are separated, and the father is raising the children on his own. She has nightmares and feels angry and afraid. Mushi has developed aggressive behaviour at home and at school, even with the teacher.

Mushi is being bullied at school which her father is working to address with the school. She has few friends, feels unloved, and the only way she expresses herself is by stealing her peers’ belongings, breaking and throwing objects, and hitting peers if they report her behaviour.

What could you do to help support Mushi with her fear, anger and being bullied at school, while helping her to understand that violence is not a good choice?

Suggested strategies and guidelines:

- Recognize that Mushi is being bullied at school, leaving her without a voice or sense of power. Creating a sense of emotional safety while talking with adults is key.

Reinforce Mushi’s right to feel safe and included, and teach age-appropriate strategies to express her feelings using “I” statements.

- Work with Mushi to address her anger in healthy ways.
- Help her to learn about her and other people’s boundaries, and to respect teachers’ and peers’ rights to be safe, too.
- As a prevention and intervention tool, classroom activities and curriculum could focus on bullying and exclusion.

Case Study 5: Eden

Eden is an 11-year-old child who comes from a country affected by war. She learned from a young age that she had to defend herself by hitting back at others, meaning aggression was acceptable, while also learning not to talk about her own fears and feelings, leaving her to be passive as well. The mother has received many calls from school about her daughter being aggressive. However, Eden is generally a very kind child, which leaves her mother feeling confused. Eden’s mother has met with the teacher and she felt ashamed to learn that her child had been aggressive. The teacher also explained that no one wants to play with Eden as a result.

What could you do to build trust with Eden and partner with Eden’s mother?

Suggested strategies and guidelines:

- Learn more about the significant difficulties Eden continues to face while integrating into Canada, including adapting to laws and social norms that differ, while understanding that she is still processing both positive and painful memories tied to her homeland.

- Create a sense of solidarity by connecting to potential SWIS/TEE (Settlement Workers in Schools/Travailleurs et travailleuses de l’établissement dans les écoles) staff and programs.
- In classroom activities, ensure a wide variety of immigration stories are discussed and that Eden has an opportunity to talk about hers (without being singled out).
- Work collaboratively with Eden’s mother and Eden to address and change her aggressive behaviour, while also building Eden’s skills to share feelings in ways that feel safe. Create a sense of hope and possibility for positive change even if it takes some time.



