Workplace Violence at Schools – Maintaining Safe Interactions: Setting Boundaries Meeting Kit



WHAT'S AT STAKE

Let's talk about creating a safe and respectful school environment. It's not just about preventing physical fights; it's also about addressing those everyday interactions that can make people feel uncomfortable, disrespected, or even threatened. We're talking about things like verbal aggression, boundary violations, and a general lack of respect. When these kinds of behaviours go unchecked, it can create a really negative atmosphere and even lead to more serious incidents.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

When we think about violence in schools, the first thing that often comes to mind is physical altercations. But other forms of violence can be just as damaging. When we don't maintain safe interactions and set clear boundaries, we create an environment where things can easily escalate. Let's break down some specific examples of boundary violations and unsafe interactions:

Types of Boundary Violations and Unsafe Interactions:

- **Verbal Aggression and Disrespect:** This includes yelling, name-calling, insults, put-downs, and any verbal abuse that makes someone feel threatened or belittled. For example, a student yelling insults at a teacher or a teacher using sarcastic and condescending remarks towards a student.
- **Intimidation and Threats:** This is about instilling fear and control through threatening gestures, aggressive body language, or direct or indirect threats of harm. For example, a student making a fist or saying "You better watch your back."
- **Inappropriate Physical Contact:** Any unwanted touching, pushing, shoving, or grabbing, even seemingly minor, is a boundary violation.
- **Ignoring or Dismissing Concerns:** This undermines trust and discourages reporting by downplaying or ignoring reports of bullying, harassment, or threats.

Contributing Factors – Why Do These Things Happen?

Several things can contribute to these unsafe interactions. Sometimes, it's a lack of clear expectations. If we don't clearly communicate what's acceptable behaviour and what's not, it can lead to confusion and boundary violations. Power imbalances, whether between students and staff or between different groups of students, can also create opportunities for abuse and intimidation. Stressful or chaotic environments can make it harder for people to regulate their emotions and can increase the likelihood of impulsive or aggressive behaviour. And if people don't have the skills to resolve conflicts peacefully, disagreements can quickly spiral out of control.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

So, how do we create a safer school where everyone feels respected and valued? It starts with being proactive about setting and maintaining clear boundaries.

Setting Clear Expectations – Getting Everyone on the Same Page:

It's crucial to clearly communicate expectations for respectful behaviour to everyone—students, colleagues, and parents. This includes expectations for how we talk to each other, what kind of physical contact is appropriate, and how we interact in general. We can do this by posting classroom rules, discussing school-wide expectations, and giving regular reminders.

Maintaining Professional Boundaries – Keeping It Professional:

- **With Students:** Avoiding personal relationships with students, refraining from sharing inappropriate personal information, and maintaining appropriate physical distance.
- **With Colleagues:** Maintaining professional conduct in all interactions, avoiding gossip or personal attacks, and respecting professional roles and responsibilities.
- **With Parents:** Maintaining professional communication, focusing on student-related matters, avoiding personal conversations or sharing personal information like phone numbers, and directing concerns about school policies or procedures to the appropriate administrators.

Setting boundaries with parents is a crucial part of maintaining a safe and professional environment.

- **Communicate Clearly and Respectfully:** When setting boundaries, be clear, direct, and respectful. Use "I" statements to express your needs and limits. Example: "I understand you're concerned, but I need to focus on teaching my class right now. Could we schedule a time to talk about this later?"
- **Set Limits on Communication:** If a parent's communication becomes excessive, disrespectful, or crosses professional boundaries (e.g., late-night calls, personal attacks), set clear limits. Example: "I'm happy to discuss your concerns during school hours or via email. I won't be able to respond to calls after 7 pm."

Responding to Boundary Violations – Taking Action:

If you see or experience a boundary violation, it's important to take action. If

it’s safe to do so, address the behaviour directly and assertively. For example, if a student uses disrespectful language, you could say something like, “That kind of language isn’t okay in this classroom.” It’s also important to document the incident—write down the date, time, location, and what exactly happened. This documentation is important for reporting and any follow-up. And finally, report the incident to your supervisor or the designated school administrator. Following the school’s reporting procedures is essential.

FINAL WORD

So, as we wrap up, remember that creating a safe and respectful school environment isn’t just about reacting to problems—it’s about preventing them. By setting clear boundaries with students, colleagues, and parents, and consistently upholding those boundaries, we can create a positive climate where everyone feels valued and respected.