

Occupational Violence Management Guidelines

Purpose

These guidelines set out to support staff in workplaces to minimise the occurrence of occupational violence and the impact of any exposure to both workers and students, develop staff skills in responding to occupational violence, and to provide rapid response and appropriate support following any incident. They fall under the general provisions of the Work Health and Safety Policy and provide the context specific to occupational violence.

Occupational violence is a complex issue with implications for the learning environment and the wider school community. Achieving a safe and supportive school environment where students are engaged and connected and that achieves the mutual goal of student and staff wellbeing underpins these Guidelines. However, this guideline explicitly addresses the staff protection dimension of school safety.

CECG acknowledges that work health and safety obligations must be met in the context of ensuring that students' human rights are respected and that reasonable adjustments are made for students with a disability. In these guidelines, the specific occupational violence risks to be managed and the strategies and interventions designed to eliminate or minimise those risks are outlined.

Background

- These Guidelines provide a structured response to assist with the management of a potential, perceived or actual violent act in any CECG work context; be that a classroom, playground, office or on a school excursion.
- The Guidelines provide guidance to minimise the risks prior to and during an incident, how to assess and implement effective risk controls to reduce the impact or likelihood of other instances of violence and how to record and critically review the management of an incident.

The immediate and longer term impact of the physical and psychological consequences of violence to staff require a concerted and continuing response. The Guidelines policy has been developed in this context and the guideline outlines the way this challenge is to be approached. These guidelines is supported by other wellbeing policies which support staff and students and include access to pastoral support including the EAP Provider: CatholicCare

Definitions

Occupational Violence (also referred to as 'workplace violence') is defined as 'any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work. Occupational violence may include personal intimidation, verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual harassment, threatening behaviour, abuse through technology (text, emails, social media and phone calls), making vexatious complaints, and making derogatory, slanderous or threatening statements to or about another person.

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Parent/Carer	A student's natural, adoptive or foster parent; guardian; or caregiver, who are authorised and entitled to participate in making decisions concerning the learning, safety and wellbeing of a student.
CECG	Catholic Education, Canberra Goulburn Diocese
Worker	has the same meaning as within the WHS legislation – and includes employees, contractors, volunteers and students on a work placement at CECG

Scope

These guidelines apply to all CECG Workplaces, any person considered to be a worker for CECG and others interacting with CECG workplaces including parents/carers and students. The workplace can include settings such as school excursions, areas beyond the work location and activities outside of school hours.

Occupational violence is not limited to incidents which occur within a workplace but also those that are a result of work. The actions and behaviours of students, visitors, parents/carers and others in so far as they create an occupational violence risk are pertinent to the scope of the guideline.

Rights and Responsibilities

- CECG has a legal responsibility under the WHS Act to provide a workplace for workers that is safe and healthy.
- The WHS Act requires CECG to remove all risks to a worker health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable and, if this is not possible, then to minimise the risk so far as is reasonably practicable.
- Workers for CECG have a right to a safe and healthy workplace.
- CECG has a general duty of care to workers and others (students & parents/carers) under the WHS Act.
- CE Workers also have a duty to exercise reasonable care and skill under the WHS Act.

Expectations of Parents/Carers

This is outlined by the Parent Charter.

Unacceptable Behaviours – Staff, Students and Parents/Carers

In the context of these Guidelines, the range of staff, student or parent/carer behaviours directed at staff which are considered serious and unacceptable include the following:

- Shouting at a person, either in person or on the telephone
- Physically or verbally intimidating any person

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- Using aggressive hand gestures, such as shaking or holding a fist towards a person
- Writing rude, defamatory, aggressive or abusive comments to/about a person member - emails/social media/letters/text messages
- Swearing at or about a person
- Pushing, hitting, punching or kicking a person (or attempting such actions)
- Directing racist or sexist comments toward a person
- Damaging or violating a person's possessions/property

This may include actions against other persons such as family members which is directly linked to a staff members actions.

Workers have the right to call a **pause to any conversation with a parent/carer** where they have a concern that the behaviour is becoming unacceptable. Where reasonable, the parent/carer should be given every opportunity to calm down and account for his/her behaviour. A meeting with the parent/carer should be facilitated by the Principal and another member of the leadership team, with no expectation that the affected worker attend that meeting unless they wish to.

Student Conflicts and Parent/Carer Interventions

Problems may arise when parents/carers attempt to resolve issues which involve their children and other students themselves by directly approaching these students or their parents/carers. In such instances, tensions and issues can escalate and behaviours can become more threatening, abusive and/or damaging to all involved. This can also cause adverse allegations to be made by different parties about the others alleging inappropriate behaviours.

It is strongly recommended that schools follow clear and unequivocal process such that conflicts and incidents between students that occur at the school are promptly investigated and resolved.

Managing a violent event

An incident of violence in the workplace may occur spontaneously and with little or no warning on a regular basis. This may particularly be the case in relation to the supervision of students with complex needs. Underpinning approaches to managing such incidents is the continuing review of teaching practices to reduce, where possible, the perceived risks to an acceptable level.

The management of this event is generally a continuous 'reactive' process, and includes:

- The use of techniques to assist the person whose behaviour poses a risk to de-escalate
- Keeping a safe distance by cordoning and containing the incident and conducting a lockdown or evacuation of relevant parties such as students
- Identifying and maintaining an exit strategy – ensure you are nearest to the door/escape route
- Avoiding being isolated and alerting others that you may need assistance
- Ensuring that any instructions or requests are made in a clear manner
- Setting and enforcing reasonable boundaries
- Maintaining a respectful approach

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- Providing pastoral support to all affected parties as soon as practicable
- Conducting a post incident review as soon as practicable after an incident and adjusting teaching practices or behaviour management processes as appropriate.

Liaison with the School and Family Services team may be required to help manage complex cases.

The management of a violent incident should not, unless as a last resort, include the use of physical and/or aggressive actions where parties are or may be harmed. This includes the use of force and restraint, not using inappropriate physical actions and avoiding, where possible physically interacting with the person (including touching the person and entering their personal space).

Training of Staff

CECG undertakes various training of workers in relation to occupational violence. This training has included:

- Dealing with difficult persons
- Having difficult conversations
- Supporting students with complex needs
- Providing pastoral support to persons in need
- Mental Health training
- The application of the Disability Standards for Education
- Conducting risk assessments
- Conflict resolution
- Implementing emergency management procedures including lockdown, evacuation and responding to fires
- Code of Conduct and Reportable Conduct obligations
- Conducting structured debriefs

In reviewing its approach to occupational violence CECG is expanding the program to:

- Provide training to teaching & support staff to assist them to manage and respond to actual or potential aggression.
- Provide conflict resolution/management training/refresher training to school and CE Office staff to assist them in engaging preventative strategies to reduce the likelihood of incidents.
- Provide leaders at CE Office and schools (Principals, Assistant Principals etc) training to assist in management and response to mental health impacts on their staff.
- Provide teaching staff with training to better support trauma informed learning
- Review how this training is delivered to ensure that key training areas are addressed

As part of this approach, each School should ensure the management of this issue, identifying:

- Current occupational violence risks
- Type of risk i.e. physical violence, verbal abuse
- Students/Parents/Carers who present this risk and status of risk assessments
- Staff exposed to occupational violence.

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- Targeted training solutions being employed to manage risks

Risk Management

The overarching principle of these guidelines is the application of a risk management approach – such that a primary consideration of managing an incident is assessing and responding appropriately to the risk and using a risk based approach for the deployment of resources and support so it is triaged and based on the areas/situations of greatest risk. The CE Risk Management Handbook provides detailed guidance of how to **Identify**, **Assess**, and **Control** risks in the workplace.

An assessment of risk to workers caused by aggressive or violent students or parents/carers usually involves raising a number of questions to which answers are required, after which appropriate risk-minimisation actions are implemented and/or strengthened. Some initial questions may include:

- Are there guidelines or a plan of action to help staff deal with aggressive students and parents/carers?
- What monitoring arrangements are in place for ensuring staff personal safety?
- Do all staff know about these arrangements and planned responses?
- Do members of the leadership team have advanced or higher-level skills to deal with distressed and aggressive students and parents/carers?
- Have staff who are likely to be involved in such incidents had training in personal safety and dealing with threatening or violent incidents?
- Is there a strategy for supporting staff who have been involved in a distressing incident?

Risk assessments should always incorporate an assessment of the physical school environment for safety-related risk factors. The areas for assessment ought to include parking areas, entryways, reception areas, workstations, playgrounds, classrooms and offices. The specific type of assessment will vary in each environment, but every assessment will benefit from considering and ensuring:

- The provision of 'safe' meeting rooms or areas (e.g. proximity to colleagues, external visibility, adequate lighting, suitable access/exit doors, electronic emergency alert systems)
- Convenient, accessible emergency escape and evacuation routes (for staff and students)
- Effectiveness of appropriate communication tools to request assistance
- Effectiveness of lockdown and/or evacuation processes
- The provision, location and monitoring of security cameras
- Adequate lighting in all areas
- Minimisation, where possible, of isolated staff and work areas
- The availability of first-aid kits and other emergency response equipment.

Risk Control

Principals are responsible for ensuring effective control measures for minimising the risk of occupational violence, with the control measures incorporating:

- Establishing and maintaining a culture of safety

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- Maintaining routine work practices which enhance safety
- The assessment of students or parents/carers who may present such risks and the use of individual behaviour support plans for students to address such risks
- The effective management of conflict
- The identification of a team of first responders for critical incidents who have appropriate training and experience
- Building and maintaining skilled and confident staff
- The implementation of a risk assessment framework when managing difficult/challenging situations
- The early identification, assessment and addressing of risks

Risk Assessments

Schools should utilise risk assessments to monitor risks of occupational violence. This is a continuous and dynamic process of identifying hazards, assessing risks, taking action to eliminate or reduce risk, monitoring and reviewing, while carrying out associated tasks.

Risk assessment applies to the situation immediately prior to and during workplace interactions with students, parents/carers or others which have potential for occupational violence. Typical operational assessments include:

- Scanning the area to assess visibility, proximity to other staff and exits; and
- Identifying common triggers for imminent violence

Effective risk assessment relies on high level communication and assessment skills and as such is based on both supervised experience and relevant training. It should also reduce the reliance on and immediate individual responses. Secondly, with well-planned assessment, the capacity of staff to know how to respond will be improved and more reliable.

Recognising and reporting behavioural warning signs

An important part of recognising the potential for occupational violence is noticing behavioural signals that may indicate rising distress and anger, such as:

- Sudden changes in expression, physical activity, posture or appearance such as pacing
- Dramatic increase or change in the volume, speed or tone of voice and the language used
- Verbal threats to harm self, others or property
- Silences, breathlessness or sighs
- Challenges or resistance to authority
- Withdrawal from engagement in normal interactions and activities.

When such behaviours or a pattern of behaviours are exhibited by **students**, staff should

- Share their observations with colleagues who have direct contact with the student, or staff who might become involved with him/her
- Make a record of this in the student's file
- Review or conduct a risk assessment to identify the level of risk posed by these actions and how these will be managed.

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When such behaviours are exhibited by parents/carers, a worker's concerns should be reported to a member of the Leadership team for follow-up as deemed appropriate.

De-escalation techniques for defusing challenging behaviours

When having such conversations, workers should use calming, non-adversarial techniques that defuse a person's anxiety or distress and enable more rational emotions to prevail in continued interactions.

Face-to-Face Interactions with Students and/or Parents/Carers

- Endeavour to hold or continue the conversation in a **safe setting** where whilst there is a degree of privacy the location does not increase the staff member safety risk. This will minimise the anxiety, fear and risk of harm to others in the vicinity who have witnessed the aggressive behaviour. Ensure that the **relocation area is safe** (i.e. reasonable proximity to colleagues, external visibility, adequate lighting, and suitable access/exit doors).
- Have **another staff member present** to assist you and consider the gender of this person, as appropriate
- **Remove any objects** from the room that may cause harm such as scissors (depending on the nature of the meeting)
- Observe **body language** during the meeting
- **Be empathic.** Try not to judge or discount the feelings of others. Whether or not you think their feelings are justified, those feelings are real to the other person. Pay attention to and acknowledge them, e.g. *'I can see that you're unhappy about...'*
- **Clarify** messages. Listen for the person's real message. What are the feelings behind the facts? **Ask reflective questions** and use both silence and re-statements.
- **Permit some verbal venting.** Let the student or parents/carer talk without interruption, as curtailing the flow can fuel his/her anger.
- **Respect personal space** and be aware of your body position. Invading personal space tends to increase the individual's anxiety and may lead to inappropriate actions. Standing eye-to-eye and toe-to-toe with a person, especially a student in your charge, sends a challenging message. Standing one leg-length away and at an angle off to the side is less likely to escalate the individual's anxiety or anger.
- Set and enforce **reasonable limits**. If the person becomes (or continues to be) hostile, defensive or disruptive, state limits and directives clearly and concisely. When setting limits, offer choices and consequences to the individual.
- **Avoid overreacting.** Remain calm, rational, and professional. Your response will directly affect the person's behaviour.
- Conclude meeting if you fear for your safety or are of the view the person's frustration is escalating.

Face-to-Face Interactions with Parents/Carers (in addition to above)

- **Use 'I' statements rather than 'you'.** For example, *'I feel that (student's name) may not have given you the whole picture,'* rather than, *'your son/daughter has not told you the truth.'*
- **Be aware of any 'hurrying' or 'dismissive' behaviours or messages** on your part. If you do not have time or have students in your care, offer a choice, for example, *'You can arrange an appointment to discuss this later today, or I will find someone else who can speak to you straight away.'*
- **Be clear about the boundaries** of your role but ensure that you take responsibility appropriately.

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State clearly what you can do for the parent/carer.

- **Avoid giving advice** at an early stage and providing personal opinions. This way, parent/carers can make their own decisions and will be less likely to blame you if the option chosen does not work out.

Aggressive/Abusive Telephone Conversations

- **Calmly and firmly set limits**, such as: *'Please lower your voice'; 'Please calm down so that I can understand your concerns and try to help you'; 'Please stop shouting [your abusive language] or I will have to terminate the call'.*
- **Feed back to the caller** what you have heard regarding the issue or concern underpinning the caller's aggression/abuse and what you believe the caller needs/wants.
- **Attempt to negotiate** some referral and response time, such as: *'You have raised some tough issues that ought to be referred to the staff member concerned/a senior member of staff'; 'I am not sure what we can do. I need to get advice from the Principal'. 'I can assure you that you will hear back from me/the school as soon as possible'.*
- **End the call** if the abuse or aggression continues or escalates, stressing beforehand that you will ask another staff member to contact the caller.
- **Make notes on what was said** immediately on termination of the call and then report the incident to the Principal or senior member of staff.

Aggressive/Abusive written communications

- **Do not reply until** first agreeing on an appropriate response in consultation with the Principal or a member of the Leadership Team
- **Reply** with a simple concise message that the correspondence/message has been referred to the relevant party for response and follow-up, which will occur as soon as possible.

Incident Management

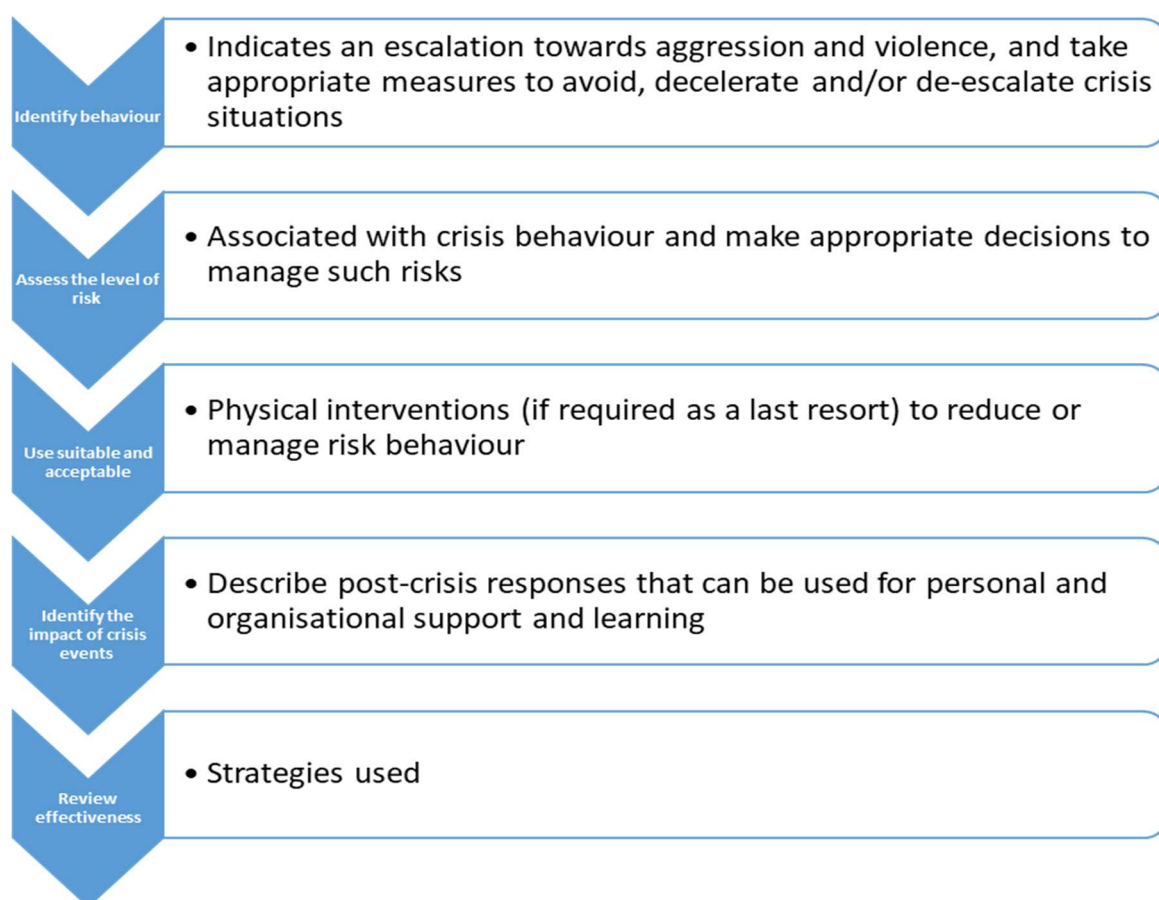
While control measures may reduce instances of occupational violence, if a violent incident occurs, the following priorities are to be addressed:

- Emergency procedures activated where necessary
- Utilising *Management of Actual or Potential Aggression* (MAPA) principles or equivalent
- Containment and control of the situation to ensure the safety of all concerned
- Provision of medical attention and seeking assistance of emergency/community services i.e. police where required
- Psychological support – Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provided in an appropriate timeframe depending on the nature of the incident
- Appropriate record keeping relating to the incident and any observations or actions taken
- Submitting a WHS Incident (injury) report
- Reporting and subsequent investigation into the circumstances of the incident
- Check in with impacted workers within 1 week post incident and follow up required action

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Important tips for responders

- If the incident is a critical incident (defined below) the Critical Incident Response Policy will be followed.
- Conduct an informal debriefing as soon as practicable after incident
 - Are there any injuries (record and treat)
 - What are the immediate requirements
 - What actions are required to limit the chances of this occurring in future
- Formal debrief as required/requested
- Consultation on how future risks will be controlled or minimised



Critical Incident

A Critical Incident is defined as an unexpected traumatic event involving personal or professional threat which evokes extreme stress, injury or fear. The Critical Incident Response Policy provides further detail.

Post Incident Review

Where practicable, the workplace will hold a focused meeting with all parties directly affected by the incident, as close as practicable to the time of the incident. Where practicable, the review should be led

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by a member of the Leadership Team where the incident occurred (or other suitable person, depending on circumstances), and include the following questions:

- What happened?
- When, why and how did it happen?
- What immediate action is required to ensure safety?
- What is/was the impact on you?
- What support do you need?
- How can we prevent it from happening again? This may require one or more additional meetings.

It is important records are made of this meeting and the discussions and identified actions in addition to the parties in attendance

Reporting and Investigating an Incident

See the following documents for further information

- WHS Incident Management and Reporting Guidelines
- WHS Incident Investigation Policy
- Staff have the right to call a **pause to any conversation with a parent/carer** where they have a concern that the behaviour is becoming unacceptable. The parent/carer should, where reasonable, be given every opportunity to calm down and account for his/her behaviour; impacted. This process should be facilitated by the Principal and another member of the leadership team, with no expectation that the affected staff member attend unless they wish to.

Post Incident Support

Principals must ensure that workers exposed to occupational violence are provided with appropriate support. Some options include the Employee Assistance Program. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is an early intervention program.

Critical Incident Debriefing, group and individual counselling is available for workers who may be adversely affected by exposure to occupational violence.

In addition to support services, longer term responses include:

- Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of controls for the prevention of violence to determine if changes are required
- Managing the return to work of staff who have taken leave after an incident
- Monitoring staff involved with the incident for any delayed reactions to the incident.

Further information on the current EAP provider can be obtained by phoning CatholicCare on 1800 800 517 during normal business hours, or on CECG's [Intranet](#)

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Related Policies and Procedures

- Work, Health and Safety Policy
- WHS Incident Management and Reporting Guidelines
- WHS Incident Investigation Guidelines
- Critical Incident Response Policy
- Injury Management Guidelines
- CE Enterprise Risk Management Framework
- Supportive and Respectful Schools Policy
- Exclusion, Expulsion and Transfer of Students policy
- Suspension of Students Policy
- Parent Charter

Legislation

- Work Health Safety Act 2011
- Education Act 2004
- Human Rights Act 2004
- Crimes Act 1900
- Discrimination Act 1991
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- Disability Standards for Education 2005
- Ombudsman Act 1989

Reference Material

[Australian Student Wellbeing Framework](#)

Acknowledgements

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Contact

For support or further questions relating to these guidelines, contact People and Culture team on 02 6234 5455 or email: mysafe@catholic.edu.au

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