Prevention of violence to staff in the education sector

Introduction

Violence in schools and other educational establishments is causing increasing concern. Results from an EU survey in 2000 show that 4 % of employees have been subjected to violence at work (from inside or outside the workplace), and, in addition, 12 % of workers in the education sector reported having been subjected to intimidation ([1]).

This factsheet provides practical guidance to employers and workers in the education sector on dealing with this issue. Bullying and harassment from work colleagues is not included in this factsheet ([2]).

What is violence at work?

Violence at work is any incident where a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted at their work, and which endangers their safety, health, well-being, or work performance. It covers insults, threats, or physical or psychological aggression exerted by people from outside the organisation against a person at work. There may be a racial or sexual dimension to the violence. Violence to staff is an occupational safety and health issue and should be dealt with at the organisational level. It is not an individual's problem.

An act of violence generally arises in a situation where there is very high or suppressed tension or pressure and where personal matters are at stake. Conflict that has not been resolved appropriately can escalate to violence. Workers in the education sector can find themselves victims of violence because aggressors see them as 'representatives' of the institution or system.

Pupils, ex-pupils, parents, visitors, or intruders might initiate violence against staff in the education sector. It is not only teachers who are suffering violence at work, but also teaching assistants, maintenance staff, cleaners, cooks, secretaries, and other support personnel.

High-risk activities

Workers are more at risk of violence when their jobs involve:

- dealing directly with pupils and/or their guardians;
- working late or alone;
- making off-site or home visits; or
- working with children with special needs.

The consequences of violence

Violence in education affects not only the direct victims, but also other individuals who share the same environment (staff, children and young adults). The reaction of people, whether victims or observers, to acts of violence can depend on their personality, learned coping strategies, the physical environment, and the organisational norms and rules. Immediate responses can be passive (accepting or avoiding) or active (negotiation, physically defending oneself).

Consequences of acts of violence for the individual include:

- physical harm
- stress
- emotional trauma
- feelings of powerlessness
- demotivation.

Consequences for the employer/organisation include:

- higher staff turnover
- increased absenteeism and sickness absence
- higher insurance costs.

Risk assessment, prevention, and protection

Employers are required to evaluate the risks to the safety and health of workers and take action to prevent or control those risks ([3]). This process can be broken down into a series of steps.

- Plan your assessment in consultation with the workforce.
- Identify the hazards.
- Decide who may be harmed, how, and where.
- Assess the level of risk and decide on action.
- Take action to eliminate or reduce the risk.
- Monitor and review the actions.

Schools have a social responsibility to stand for principles of dignity and respect. Employers also have legal duties to prevent violence. The school's formal policies and management attitudes are important. Implementation of some first steps (such as developing a policy for violence, reporting procedures, and training and education) can in time help develop a positive organisational climate where importance is placed on people's safety and dignity. Under-reporting of violent incidents is common, hiding the extent of the problem.

Complex social, structural, organisational, or environmental factors cause violence, and therefore there is no single solution to the problem. Prevention takes place at two levels; preventing acts of violence from occurring, and supporting the victim(s) if an incident has occurred.

Preventive solutions should be implemented after the risk assessment has taken place, using information from, and in cooperation with, the enforcing authorities if necessary.

([1]) *Third European Survey on Working Conditions 2000*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Working Conditions. http://www.eurofound.ie/publications/EF0121.htm

([2]) For information on this topic, see Agency factsheet 23. http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/

([3]) Council Directive 89/391 of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work, transposed into law in all Member States.

Checklist 1: Prevention of violence to staff

Environmental design

✓ Can visibility and lighting be improved where there is a risk of violence?

✓ Can access to the workplace be better controlled, and visibility of entrances improved, to allow checks of visitors?

✓ Can tools, implements, equipment and furniture that could be used as weapons be replaced?

✓ Can physical security measures be improved (e.g. alarms)?

✓ Can a positive physical environment be provided (e.g. colours, climate control)?

Administrative controls

✓ Can the anti-violence policy be improved and better displayed?

✓ Are staff, parents, and students informed of their rights and responsibilities?

✓ Is there a safety committee in existence that can consider the issue of violence?

✓ Are there suitable procedures in place for when an incident occurs? When were they last reviewed? Is the record-keeping process adequate, and are records reviewed to identify patterns or risks?

✓ Can communication on the issue of violence between workers and management be improved?

✓ Is there suitable coverage of the issue of violence in the risk assessment?

✓ Have safer work practices been adopted (e.g. escorting co-workers, late-night working, supervision of pupils by two members of staff where possible)?

✓ Are staffing levels in relation to the number of pupils sufficient to ensure the safety of staff?

✓ Can staff cooperate to develop their own working methods?

✓ Are support structures (e.g. counselling services) in place?

✓ Is there provision of educational psychological services for advice and counselling?

✓ How are visitors supervised on the school premises?

Behavioural strategies

✓ Are employees and students trained in non-violent response and conflict resolution?

✓ Is there training on the recognition of the early signs and potential for acts of violence?

✓ Are students and parents involved in developing a zero-tolerance policy to violence, discriminatory language and behaviour, and bullying and harassment?

✓ Is a sense of community and cooperation encouraged to develop?

Awareness-raising and partnerships

✓ Are the enforcing authorities involved in relevant national awareness-raising programmes?

✓ Is there cooperation between school staff, governors, parents, students, enforcing authorities, and trade unions?

✓ Are positive attitudes, tolerance, and respect to others encouraged?

✓ Is good practice information disseminated?

Checklist 2: Minimising harm after violent incidents

It is important to have well-known procedures to follow in the case of any violent incident with the purpose of preventing further harm to the victim and limiting the damage suffered. In this framework, it is important that:

✓ the person who has been a victim of violence, or witnessed an act of violence, is not left alone in the hours following the events;

✓ senior management should become involved, be sympathetic, and support the victim;

✓ psychological support is provided to the victim both immediately and later on in the event of post-traumatic stress;

✓ the victim receives support in carrying out the necessary administrative and legal procedures (e.g. how to report the incident);

✓ other workers are informed;

✓ risk assessments are reviewed to identify what additional measures are necessary.

Further information

The web site of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work is at http://agency.osha.eu.int

The Agency's material on preventing psychosocial risks at work is at http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/

The Agency's material on good safety and health practice in the education sector is at http://europe.osha.eu.int/good_practice/sector/education/

Adapting to change in work and society; a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002–06. European Commission. 2002.
http://europe.osha.eu.int/systems/strategies/future/

Factsheets from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Agency factsheets in all Community languages are available free of charge to download from
http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/

Facts 4 — *Preventing work-related musculoskeletal disorders*

Facts 13 — *Successful management to prevent accidents*

Facts 14 — *Preventing work-related slips, trips, and falls*

Facts 22 — *Work-related stress*

Facts 24 — *Violence at work*

Facts 31 — *Practical advice for workers on tackling work-related stress and its causes*

Facts 32 — *How to tackle psychosocial issues and reduce work-related stress*

Facts 45 — *Management of occupational safety and health in the education sector*

Facts 46 — *Occupational health and safety in the education sector*

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