



Preventing Restraint and Seclusion in Schools

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Restraint and seclusion are crisis or emergency responses, which should only be used in extreme situations (e.g., a student engaging in repeated forceful physical aggression toward self or others) when risk of **serious and imminent physical harm or injury** is high and when an emergency response may reduce that risk. Restraint and seclusion are not planned or therapeutic interventions and should never be a routine part of a behavior support plan or used as a consequence for behavior.

Prevalence & Definition of Restraint & Seclusion

Estimating exactly how often restraint and seclusion occur is challenging because the definitions and reporting requirements vary by state, and sometimes by district. Using the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), which includes reported data from almost every public school in the USA, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR, 2018a) reported that **122,000 students (approximately 0.2% of all students enrolled)** experienced a restraint or seclusion during the last data collection period (2015-2016), and approximately **71% of the students restrained** and **66% of students secluded** were identified **with disabilities** under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

OCR (2018b) defines physical restraint* and seclusion in the following ways.

- **Physical restraint:** "a personal restriction that immobilizes or reduces the ability of a student to move his or her torso, arms, legs, or head freely. The term physical restraint does not include a physical escort. Physical escort means a temporary touching or holding of the hand, wrist, arm, shoulder or back for the purpose of inducing a student who is acting out to walk to a safe location."
- **Seclusion:** "the involuntary confinement of a student alone in a room or area from which the student is physically prevented from leaving. It does not include a timeout, which is a behavior management technique that is part of an approved program, involves the monitored separation of the student in a non-locked setting, and is implemented for the purpose of calming."

*Other forms of restraint, such as mechanical or chemical, should never be used in schools (US DOE, 2012).

Reporting & Reviewing Restraint & Seclusion

The use of restraint or seclusion should always be documented and reported to the family, district, and state according to district and state procedures and policies. Documentation should include:

- Specific procedure used (e.g., standing restraint);
- Time of day, duration, and location of the event; and a
- Detailed account of the events that occurred before, during, and after use of a restraint or seclusion procedure.

The use of restraint or seclusion should be regularly reviewed and monitored to ensure these crisis procedures are used in accordance with district and state procedures. These data should be examined at district, state, and federal levels to understand whether supporting students and reducing behavioral crises at each level has been successful.

Alternatives to Restraint & Seclusion

Prevention is the best alternative. When a severe crisis occurs, educators must focus on ensuring that everyone is safe from injury AND de-escalating the crisis situation. In some cases, a response may be necessary to maintain safety and prevent serious injury; however, injury also is a concern when using restraint or seclusion. Therefore, the best alternative to restraint and seclusion is to prevent a crisis situation from occurring. Here are some prevention considerations:

Behavior Intervention Practices are Critical

Universal, positive, and preventive behavior intervention practices are critical to support all students, including students with disabilities and those with a history of challenging behaviors. Having positive expectations for students, explicitly teaching social and emotional skills, providing

positive specific feedback, and reinforcing accomplishments create an environment that functions as a “protective factor” for students with a history of challenging behavior. Within a multi-tiered system of support, like PBIS, these are “Tier 1” practices.

Behavior is a Form of Communication

Educators must understand that behavior is a form of communication and that all behavior serves a function. Students use their behavior to communicate that they want to get something (like attention or an activity) or avoid something (like escape an unpleasant or undesired situation). Therefore, when implementing more targeted (Tier 2) or intensive (Tier 3) prevention supports, educators must (a) teach students a replacement skill (i.e., more appropriate behavior) that effectively results in similar consequences and (b) make individualized adjustments to the classroom and school environment to set students up for success. For example, some evidence-based strategies include providing reminders, establishing predictable routines, adjusting academic instruction and tasks, and arranging the environment so the replacement skills “work” for the student. Increasing the likelihood of student success reduces the likelihood of a crisis situation.

Training and Support for Educators

Educators need training and ongoing support to effectively implement this continuum or tiers of behavior support practices. The US DOE (2012) recommends providing ongoing professional development on the use of effective alternatives to restraint and seclusion, such as PBIS.

Data are Critical

Educators need access to meaningful and readily summarized data to (a) determine if Tier 1 supports are working, (b) identify the function of student behavior, (c) select implementable and function-based interventions, (d) evaluate accuracy of intervention implementation, (e) assess if interventions are working, and (f) determine whether school-wide goals of reducing crisis incidents are being met.

Work as a Team

If crisis-level behaviors occur, trained educators must work as a coordinated team to calmly implement de-escalation strategies and, if necessary, implement crisis response strategies. To minimize the risks of moving a student in crisis, restraint may be preferable to seclusion. As soon as the emergency dissipates and the student is no longer in serious physical harm to self or others, restraint or seclusion should be discontinued and educators should support the student's return to typical routines (e.g., review expectations, practice replacement skills, remove triggers in the environment).

Any crisis occurrence should be viewed as a prevention failure and trigger a debrief of the event with review and enhancement of the prevention plan, including (a) prevention practice components, (b) risk screening and function-based data collection procedures, (c) personnel preparation and coaching, (d) implementation accuracy and fluency, and (e) integrity of the positive behavior supports available to all students. The ultimate goal is to make informed adjustments to prevent future crises.

Policy & Guidance Implications

Because states provide variable guidance to districts and schools with respect to policy, practices, data collection, and personnel preparation, guidance from the federal government may be helpful. For example, the US DOE developed the [Restraint and Seclusion Resource Document¹](#), which highlighted the conditions under which crisis responses may become necessary and emphasized the importance of prevention. In addition, proposed legislation, such as the Keeping All Students Safe Act, provide further guidance to states. The benefits and cautions related to this issue were reflected in the [testimony of Dr. George Sugai²](#) during the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee Hearing on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education on “[Classrooms in Crisis: Examining the Inappropriate Use of Seclusion and Restraint Practices³](#).”

The Bottom Line

Every student and educator has the right to a safe, respectful, effective, and constructive learning environment, especially students who are at risk for developing challenging behavior or have histories of such behavior. Prevention is the key to how we (a) arrange and operate our schools and classrooms, (b) develop interventions to support students with a history of challenging behavior, and (c) respond after a crisis to ensure that all students and educators are more likely to be successful the next time.

1. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/seclusion/restraint-and-seclusion-resource-document.html>
2. <https://www.pbis.org/Common/Cms/files/pbisresources/SugaiTestimony022719.pdf>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM19qJPdkA0>

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