# Fact sheet: Staff intervention in physical altercations between students

This information is for school principals and staff. Ensuring schools are safe places of work and learning is a priority for the Department.

## The Department’s expectations for staff intervening in physical altercations

School staff have a [duty of care](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/duty-of-care/policy) in relation to students and, under the [Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/education-and-training-reform-act-2006/092), must also take reasonable care for the health and safety of themselves and others (including students) who may be affected by what they do or don’t do at work.

School staff are required to take reasonable steps to reduce the risk of reasonably foreseeable harm to students when intervening in a student altercation. In this context, ‘reasonable’ means:

* proportionate to the risk of harm to themselves and to the students
* respectful of the student’s dignity
* the steps taken are discontinued once the risk of harm has dissipated.

Staff need to balance the likelihood of harm occurring if intervention measures are *not* taken against the risk of harm to the staff member themselves if intervening in a student altercation.

## Staff intervening in physical altercations – *without* physical intervention

Staff should take proactive steps to reduce the risk of harm in all student altercations. These steps will depend on the individual circumstances but might include:

* verbally intervening, using authority as a teacher, and issuing clear directions to the students to stop any threatening or violent behaviour
* sending other students to gather more staff to support staff already at the scene
* physically moving towards the students, to exert authority
* directing other students to move away from the fight
* calling the police, where appropriate – or getting another staff member to call the police.

## Staff intervening in physical altercations – *with* physical intervention

The decision about whether to physically intervene in an altercation between students rests with the professional judgment of the staff member/s involved. Staff will need to consider both their duty of care to their students and their obligation to take reasonable care for the health and safety of themselves and others while at work.

Staff should not physically intervene (i.e., stand between students or physically prevent them from hurting one another) unless it would be safe and reasonable to do so in the circumstances. When determining whether it is safe and reasonable to intervene, factors to consider include:

* the characteristics of the students, including their size
* whether the students have weapons
* how the student/s typically respond to staff direction
* the presence of enough staff members to respond to the altercation
* if a student can see, hear and understand instructions so they can follow instructions and communicate distress
* hazards in the physical environment

[Physical restraint](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/restraint-seclusion/policy) is the use of physical force to prevent, restrict or subdue the movement of a student’s body or part of their body. Students are not free to move away when they are being physically restrained. Physical interventions which use physical contact to block, deflect or redirect a student's actions, or disengage a student's grip, but from which a student can move freely away are not considered acts of physical restraint.

Physical restraint of a student may only be used in exceptional circumstances where there is an imminent threat of physical harm or danger to a student or others, where such action would be considered reasonable in all the circumstances and there is no less restrictive means of responding in the circumstances.

If physical restraint is used, staff must:

* use the minimum force required to avoid the dangerous behaviour or risk of harm
* visually monitor the student(s) for signs of distress and pain to ensure the student’s physical health is not jeopardised and that the student, other students, and staff are safe
* only restrain the student(s) for the minimum duration required and stop restraining the student(s) once the danger has passed

See the Restraint and Seclusion Policy for reporting requirements

**Further information**

[Restraint and Seclusion Policy](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/restraint-seclusion/policy)

[Duty of care](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/duty-of-care/policy)

[Work-Related Violence in Schools Policy](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/work-related-violence-schools/policy)

[Work-Related Violence in Schools Post-Incident Checklist](file:///C%3A/Users/09166309/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/ADWZ3PFD/Work-Related%20Violence%20in%20Schools%20Post%20Incident%20Checklist%20%28PDF%29)

**Contact**

Principal Behaviour Support Adviser Unit

Email: restraint.seclusion@education.vic.gov.au

OHS Advisory Service (for health and safety advice)

Email: safety@education.vic.gov.au