

# Respond safely to physical aggression

A suggestion for implementing the strategy 'Respond in challenging situations' from the Guide: [Behaviour and learning](#)

- 
- Includes:**
- Respond rather than react
  - Assess and defuse
  - Appear calm
  - Respond to patterns of aggression
  - Determine if physical restraint is acceptable
  - Physical restraint as a last resort

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From

Guide: [Behaviour and learning](#)

Strategy: [Respond in challenging situations](#)

Suggestion: [Respond safely to physical aggression](#)

Date

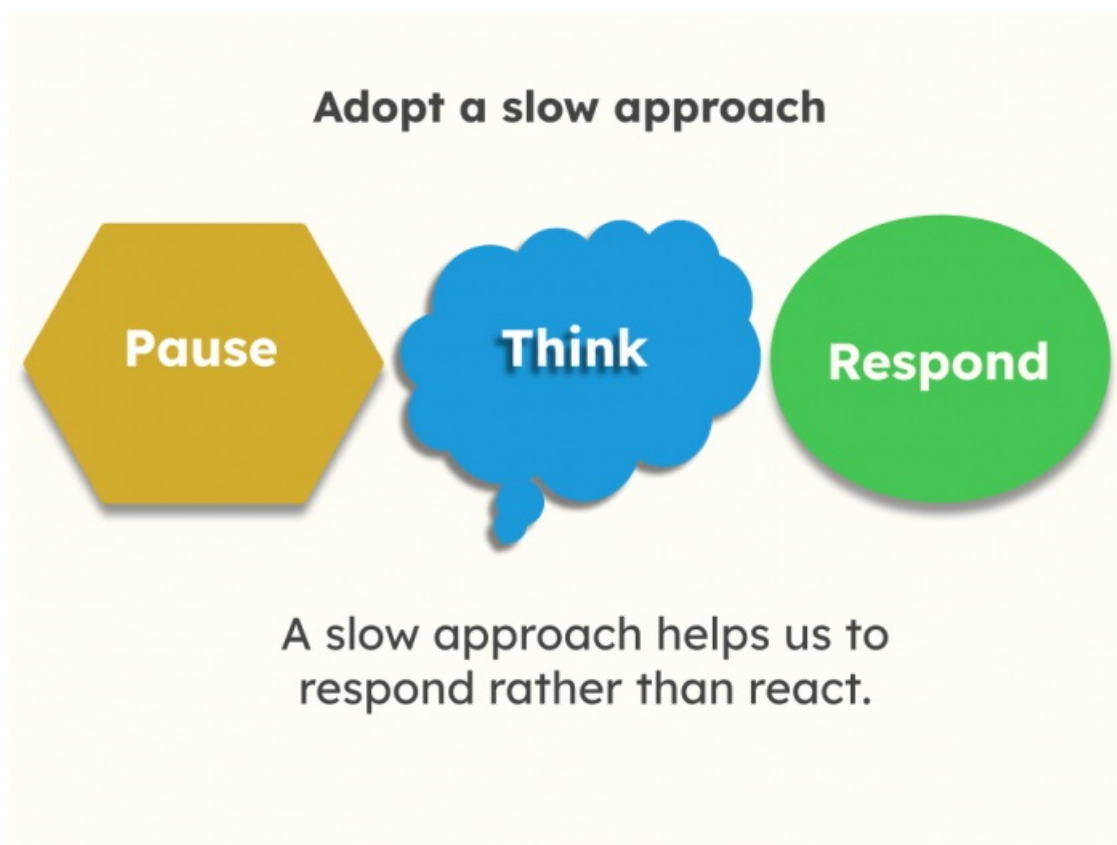
16 June 2026

Link

[inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/respond-safely-to-physical-aggression](https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/respond-safely-to-physical-aggression)

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## Respond rather than react



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When responding, a slow approach allows us to be logical, self-reflective and relational rather than reactive. Fast thinking can be more emotional and instinctive, and we can rush into poor decisions that increase distress and do more harm than good.

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## Assess and defuse

Safety comes first. The goal is to defuse the situation. Rehearse strategies so that staff can act with confidence in times of challenge.

- Stop and think before acting.
- If the student has a support plan, follow the processes outlined in this plan.
- Adopt a calm manner.
- Use [de-escalation strategies](#) outlined in the previous section of this guide.
- Connect with ākongā using [relational approaches](#).
- Remove other students from the area or remove the student to another space or another room. Ask for the student's cooperation to do this, offering high probability instructions. For example, say, "Would you like to visit Mr Williams or have some time in the library corner?"
- Seek help from other staff using school systems and protocols. When possible, get support from people who have strong positive relationships with ākongā.
- Assist rather than punish the student. Punishing can escalate a situation.

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## Appear calm

Reasoning with an enraged person is not possible. Your only objective should be to reduce the level of arousal so that discussion becomes possible. We are all driven to fight, flight or freeze when scared. However, to calm down someone who is angry or upset you must appear to be calm yourself, even if you aren't.

**Source:**

[Keeping ambulance officers safe | Tasmanian Department of Health](https://www.health.tas.gov.au/hospitals/ambulance/ambulance-services-tasmanians/keeping-ambulance-officers-safe#learn-techniques-to-help-us)  
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## Respond to patterns of aggression

Work as a team to identify and address factors that shape behaviour. Develop agreed strategies and ways to respond in times of challenge.

Also read these pages in this guide:

- [Foster positive relationships](#)
- [Foster wellbeing](#)
- [Embed social and emotional skills](#)
- [Design learning environments](#)

Work with ākonga and whānau to understand what shapes the behaviour.

- Build trusting positive relationships.
- Use approaches that foster wellbeing and teach social and emotional skills.
- Review environments and teaching and learning to ensure the needs of the learner are being met.
- Develop a support plan that includes strengths as well as things that cause distress and known signs of distress.
- Develop early response strategies that can be used to support ākonga at the onset of distress such as ways to approach and talk to ākonga, quiet spaces, time out or movement breaks and visuals or thinking routines.
- Rehearse early response strategies with ākonga and whānau.

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## Determine if physical restraint is acceptable



Source:

[Responding to ākonga distress without restraint – Education in New Zealand](https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/behaviour-services-to-help-schools-and-students/responding-to-akonga-distress-without-restraint/)

<https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/behaviour-services-to-help-schools-and-students/responding-to-akonga-distress-without-restraint/>

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## Physical restraint as a last resort

Sometimes a plan may identify physical restraint as a last resort.

Please contact your local **Te Mahau Office of the Ministry of Education**, who will support you if physical restraint is identified as part of a support plan.

If this is the case, teams will need to ensure that:

- all other possible strategies are being explored, including environmental modifications or adaptations that prevent harm and improve safety.
- it is for responding to escalating distress that would result in imminent harm.
- there is informed consent from parents, whānau and caregivers.
- the frequency is monitored and reviewed with the intention to minimise and, when possible, eliminate.

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