

Preventing injuries

in the special education classroom

Working in education is gratifying and can have a life-changing impact on students. However, this work is not without hazards. In the special education classroom, injuries may result from moving students or responding to aggressive behavior. Here are some strategies for providing a safe, constructive learning environment.

Develop a plan

Behavior support plans (BSPs) help students build positive behaviors while eliminating or reducing disruptive or aggressive behaviors. Developing the plan is a team effort by teachers, instructional aides, and other learning professionals. A behavioral support plan can prevent workplace injuries by:

- Ensuring all staff are familiar with the plan
- Confirming that all staff follow the plan
- Reporting potential plan changes when needed
- Keeping the plan up-to-date
- Including triggers that may lead to behavior changes, such as a fire drill, or substitutes
- Noting specific ways to create and support positive behaviors

Dress for safety

What to wear:

- Loose or baggy clothing that you can easily slip out of if it is grabbed or pulled; long sleeves and long pants whenever possible to protect from bites or scratches
- Bite guards, shin guards, or padded jackets, when indicated in a student's BSP

- Safety glasses and face shields when working with students known to spit or throw objects.
- Ear plugs or ear muffs when supporting students who engage in frequent, loud vocalizations
- Knit hat or a ball cap to prevent hair pulling. Tie back long hair, but be aware that a pony tail may be grabbed.
- Sturdy, comfortable, well-fitted, closed-toe/ closed-back shoes with non-slip soles. Check shoes regularly for wear, and replace if you are experiencing knee, hip, back, shoulder, and/or neck pain.



Resources

Additional resources are available on the education page of saif.com/education

What to avoid:

- Necklaces and ties. Use clip-on identification tags or break-away lanyards.
- Rings, especially with protruding stones. Turn stones inward to avoid scratching or getting caught.
- Dangling or hoop earrings. Consider eliminating all earrings, even studs, as they can cause injuries if pulled

Prevent strains and falls

- For stability, stand with your feet shoulders width apart, step back with one foot, and don't lock your knees.
- Sit squarely in the middle of your chair with your feet and the chair legs firmly on the ground. Don't sit on the edge of the chair, or lean forward or back.
- Follow your organization's intervention training instructions when students are escalating or experiencing behavior crisis events. Specific interventions may be found in the student's BSP, which are designed to keep you and the student as safe as possible at all times.
- Whether you are helping a non-escalated child up from the floor or lifting a box, flex your knees and lift with your legs. Don't lift more than your personal limits. Use lift equipment or get help if needed.

Other considerations

Communication. Set aside time for teachers and assistants to share student observations and plan next steps. Also, provide a way for staff to communicate and get assistance in a crisis, such as two-way radio. Consider using pictograms to communicate classroom hazards to staff and students. (Search "classroom pictograms" online for examples.)

Incident review. Debrief to prevent incidents from happening again. Make sure staff have access to support services as they process the incident.

Projectile management. Limit access to items that students could throw. Evaluate learning tools and consider substituting safer items.

Equipment. Use tools and equipment when working with students, including lifts, powered changing tables, and personal protective equipment.

Bloodborne pathogens. Know your organization's exposure control plan and report any exposure immediately. Wear protective equipment (splash and bite guards, safety glasses, barrier gloves) when necessary.

Housekeeping. Good housekeeping is everyone's responsibility and can reduce slips trips, and falls. Pick up any dropped items immediately. Keep school supplies organized and safely stored on shelves. Avoid clutter.

Healthy habits. To avoid spreading germs, wash hands throughout the day and always before eating. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your elbow when sneezing and coughing; teach and encourage students to do the same.

Self-care. Set aside time to recharge and relax. Employees who are stressed, lack adequate sleep, or have not eaten properly are at increased risk of injury. Find support through your employer's Employee Assistance Plan, if available.

