

Adolescents' Experience With Workplace Aggression: School Health Implications

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**Carolyn R. Smith, PhD, RN¹, Bonnie S. Fisher, PhD²,
Gordon L. Gillespie, PhD, PHCNS-BC, FAEN¹,
Theresa A. Beery, PhD, RN, ACNP¹, and
Donna M. Gates, EdD, RN, FAAN¹**

Abstract

Aggression exposure is a critical health issue facing adolescents in the United States. Exposure occurs in various settings including home, school, and the community. An emerging context for aggression exposure is in the workplace. Thirty adolescent employees age 16–18 participated in a qualitative study exploring proposed responses to future workplace aggression. Semistructured interviews were used to gather participants' proposed responses to a series of hypothetical aggressive incidents in the workplace. Conventional content analysis identified patterns and themes among the participants' responses. Results indicated adolescent employees' proposed responses to workplace aggression are similar to other forms of aggression such as peer-bullying and teen dating violence. Education and training are needed within the school setting to promote appropriate responses to various forms of aggression encountered by adolescents. Implications for school health professionals' involvement in addressing responses to such aggression and further research opportunities are explored.

Keywords

adolescence, aggression response, workplace aggression, workplace safety

Aggression exposure among adolescents has received increased attention among researchers, practitioners, and educators in recent years (deLara, 2008; Elledge et al., 2010; Rauscher, 2008; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Aggression exposure occurs in various contexts such as home, school, and the community. One understudied context where adolescents are exposed to aggression is the workplace. Approximately 5.9 million U.S. adolescents age 16–19 hold part-time or full-time positions in the private sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011) and are at risk for exposure to workplace aggression. It remains unknown whether adolescent employees not exposed to workplace aggression have a planned response to future workplace aggression incidents that is appropriate for the occupational setting. The purpose of this study was to explore what adolescents would do when faced with workplace aggression.

Workers of all ages, including adolescents, are exposed to workplace aggression (Harrell, 2011). A survey of 1,171 adolescent workers age 14–17 reported that nearly one third of participants ($n = 368$) had experienced aggression at least once since they started working (Rauscher, 2008). Aggressive behaviors included verbal threats (25%; $n = 294$), physical attacks (10%; $n = 117$), and sexual harassment (10%; $n = 115$) perpetrated by customers, coworkers, supervisors, or a family member or friend. Further, adolescents express

concerns regarding the potential for exposure to workplace aggression. A multisite cross-sectional survey conducted by Runyan, Bowling, Schulman, and Gallagher (2005) found adolescents age 14–17 ($n = 396$) with current or past work experience in the retail sector expressed concerns about experiencing future workplace aggression, such as dealing with angry customers, not getting along with coworkers, and being physically attacked. Despite adolescent workers reporting concerns about and experiences of workplace aggression, adolescents reported receiving minimal training and education on handling incidents of workplace aggression (Runyan et al., 2007). No published studies were found evaluating adolescent employees' proposed or actual responses to aggressive incidents in the workplace.

Compared to the dearth of research evaluating adolescent employees, several researchers explored adult employees'

¹ College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

² College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Carolyn R. Smith, PhD, RN, College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, 235 Procter Hall, P.O. Box 21-0038, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA.
Email: carolyn.smith@uc.edu

actual responses to aggression. Responses to incidents of workplace aggression reported by adult employees include problem-focused, escape-avoidance, and support-seeking strategies (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Problem-focused strategies aim to deal directly with the problem and include tactics such as ingratiation (Yagil, Ben-Zur, & Tamir, 2011), making the aggressor happy (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007), direct communication (Turte, Correa, da Luz, & Fischer, 2012; Yagil et al. 2011), or retaliation/defending oneself (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Conversely, escape-avoidance strategies seek to disengage from rather than deal with the problem through tactics such as avoiding contact with an aggressor (Yagil et al., 2011). Support-seeking strategies seek to solicit help, advice, or support from others to deal with one's feelings about the problem and include venting/sharing emotions about the workplace aggression incident, advice seeking (Yagil et al. 2011), and seeking support from coworkers as witnesses to the incident (Reynolds & Harris, 2006).

The application of workplace aggression responses reported by adult employees is limited because adolescent employees differ from adult employees in factors such as work experience, maturity, and job investment. Most adolescents have limited or no work experiences from which to draw should workplace aggression occur. Conversely, adults have more years of working experience and therefore may have previous knowledge of or experience with aggression to inform a future planned and appropriate response to workplace aggression. Adolescents are still developing their cognitive, emotional, and social maturity skills (National Research Council, 1998; Rauscher, 2008; Runyan, Schulman, & Hoffman, 2003; Sudhinaraset & Blum, 2010). This immaturity and inexperience may interfere with their ability to (a) assess aggressive behaviors and appropriately respond; (b) recognize, control, and channel the emotional responses of themselves and/or aggressors; and (c) communicate concerns about aggression to obtain support and assistance from coworkers and supervisors. Finally, adolescents differ from adult employees in that they are not financially dependent upon maintaining their job. Unlike adults who typically work to earn a living wage, many adolescents seek employment to earn money for ancillary expenses and therefore may be less inclined to preserve their job should a negative encounter take place in the workplace.

Although research documents that adolescent workers experience aggression, have concerns about future aggression, and report receiving minimal training to handle aggression, it remains an open question, one ripe for inquiry, as to how adolescent employees might handle workplace aggression incidents. Findings from adult samples may not represent adolescent responses. There are three key reasons to substantiate the need to understand adolescent employees' plans for responding to workplace aggression. First, this information will provide valuable insight into whether proposed responses are appropriate for the given perpetrator

and/or type of aggressive incident. Second, findings will guide the development of adolescent-focused occupational education and training to provide these novice workers with skills for responding to workplace aggression in ways that preserve their personal safety, address the problem directly, and prevent adolescents from quitting the job to avoid workplace aggression. Finally, findings will provide valuable information that school health professionals can incorporate into prevention programs.

Method

This study explored the various types of proposed responses to aggression encountered by adolescents in the workplace. Since the workplace is an understudied setting where adolescents most likely are exposed to incidents of aggression, it is important to know if adolescent workers' responses to future workplace aggression will be similar to (a) adolescents' responses to other types of aggression encountered, and (b) responses to workplace aggression among adult workers. Therefore, the research question guiding the study was: What responses do adolescents propose in response to hypothetical vignettes of aggression they might encounter in the workplace? This study used a qualitative design to explore adolescent workers' proposed responses to potential workplace aggression incidents. Approval for the study was obtained from the first author's university Institutional Review Board.

Setting and Sample

A family-owned food manufacturer operating a retail store chain selling ice cream, confectionaries, and baked goods was the setting for this study. The 14 retail stores' locations are spread across one Midwestern metropolitan area employing about 250 full-time and part-time workers. Of the workers, there were approximately 125 adolescents aged 15–18 eligible for study participation. The three inclusion criteria were (1) being between the ages of 15–18 years, (2) working at least 8 hr per week, and (3) proficient in English. Employees meeting the inclusion criteria irrespective of gender or ethnic and racial background were considered eligible to participate. Thirty-one participants or one quarter (25%) of the total number of eligible employees comprised the study sample.

Procedures

Permission to recruit adolescent employees was obtained from store and corporate-level management. From April 2010 to April 2011, 31 adolescent employees were recruited for the study. Direct recruitment methods utilized by the first author were distribution of recruitment flyers and providing a 3-min study presentation to potential study participants. To confirm eligibility and enroll in the study, potential participants were instructed to contact the first author. Potential

Table 1. Sample Hypothetical Scenarios Presented To Participants.

Type of workplace aggression	Hypothetical scenario“Imagine that you are working your shift and . . .
Verbal harassment	(Aggressor) starts yelling and cursing at you in front of everyone else in the store. How would you respond?”
Sexual harassment	(Aggressor) is making unwanted sexual passes or advances towards you or is saying inappropriate sexual things to you. How would you respond?”
Physical threat	(Aggressor) starts threatening to physically harm you and you really do feel like this is a legitimate threat of harm. How would you respond?”
Physical assault	(Aggressor) physically assault you. How would you respond?”
Robbery	. . . someone comes in with a gun demanding money from the cash register. How would you respond?”

participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time; no participants withdrew. Parental permission and written assent for participants younger than 18 years and signed consent for participants age 18 was obtained. Due to lack of written parental permission, data from one participant were excluded from analysis. The first author conducted the individual interviews at a public library or by phone to ensure confidentiality and reduce coercion to participate. Participants received a \$25 prepaid credit card as payment.

Semistructured interview questions explored participants' planned response to various workplace aggression scenarios. The first author read the scenario aloud and then participants were asked to describe how they would respond in that situation. Seventeen scenarios were presented addressing four types of aggression (i.e., verbal harassment, sexual harassment, threat of physical violence, physical assault) based on the relationship to the adolescent employee (i.e., customer, coworker, supervisor, personal acquaintance) in addition to a scenario describing an attempted robbery. Table 1 presents a sample of the scenarios. The first author asked additional questions to probe participants' responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. To ensure accuracy, all typed transcripts were checked against the audio files by the first author prior to analysis. Interviews ranged in length from 8 to 62 min (mean = 25.9 min; median = 22.9 min; $SD = 12.1$).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted using conventional content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional content analysis is a qualitative analysis technique in which codes and themes come directly from the data to describe a phenomenon. To structure the steps of data analysis, a systematic approach for conducting qualitative data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. First two study team members reduced the data through line-by-line reading and coding. The initial coding scheme provided a foundation for developing themes and subthemes. The code and theme-building process was facilitated through the use of NVivo 8[®]

qualitative management software (Burlington, MA). Study findings are reported as themes and are accompanied by direct quotes that best illustrate each theme.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility (or truth value) of the data was addressed by the use of investigator debriefings and investigator triangulation between the first and third authors to develop and confirm themes. Next, themes with representative exemplars were discussed with remaining coauthors periodically during the analysis process. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions with excerpts for themes, thereby enhancing a reader's ability to draw conclusions between the context of this study's findings and a second population. Dependability (or reliability) and confirmability (or objectivity) were both met through use of an audit trail to track coding and theme development and investigator triangulation.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The sample ($n = 30$) included 20 female and 10 male adolescents. All participants self-identified as Caucasian and non-Hispanic. The average age of participants was 17.3 years (range 16–18). Participants reported working on average 15 hr per week (range 8–28) and had been employed by the participating company for an average of 11 months (range 1–40).

Themes

Twelve themes emerged from analysis of participants' proposed responses to the hypothetical aggressive scenarios.

Tolerate or Ignore It. Thirteen participants (43.3%) described putting up with or paying no attention to an aggressor's behavior. Proposed responses of tolerance or ignoring the situation were commonly given to hypothetical scenarios of verbal or sexual harassment when the aggressor was a customer or coworker. For example, an 18-year-old male

participant believed he would respond to customer verbal harassment in the following manner:

I normally just ignore [customer verbal harassment]. I don't let it get to me. Just try to remain pleasant to them, and that's about it. If they're just saying stuff, just ignore it and try to get them out of there as fast as possible.

Similarly, the scenario of customer sexual harassment yielded the following response from a 16-year-old female:

Yeah, I try and ignore [sexual harassment from a customer], and then I'd just kind of like take it as like a small—I'd play it off as a small compliment, and I'd just give them their stuff as fast as I could, and just move onto the next person really fast.

A final example came from an 18-year-old female in response to a scenario where a customer is physically threatening her with harm: "I probably wouldn't really pay attention to [customer physical threat]. I was—they're angry and they—and they're just probably gonna cool off, and I would not worry about it."

Give Them What They Want. A total of 17 participants (56.7%) believed they would keep the aggressors happy by doing or giving what they want as a way to defuse or mitigate the aggression. Hypothetical scenarios of customer verbal harassment and robbery were the primary situations that evoked this response and described below. When responding to customer verbal harassment, participants believed they would give in to customers' demands accompanied by apologies and offers to remedy the situation. Participants explained that this action was a way to salvage the business transaction. The following excerpts provide examples of this theme. A 16-year-old female supposed:

I'd probably just apologize profusely, and tell [verbally harassing customers] I could remake [the food items] for them, or I could get something for them, or get it for free or something like that, and just fix whatever the problem was, and, uhm, apologize, and apologize.

An 18-year-old male said: "Just basically calm [the verbally harassing customers] down and do whatever I can to appease them because you want them to come back and everything. You don't want to lose business, basically."

Similar to appeasing a verbally harassing customer, participants proposed responding to the hypothetical scenario of a robbery by giving in to a robber's demands. However, unlike the rationale provided for giving in to customer demands, participants explained this response was motivated by a desire to ensure personal safety. For example, a 16-year-old female participant indicated:

I'd probably just do what [the robbers] say, just because if my life's in danger, I don't really care what happens to like—if they want money, I think my life's more important than money. So I'd probably give them what they want.

An 18-year-old female responded:

I'd probably end up just giving the money because that's a lot better than dying in the process. And just like cooperate with what they [the robbers] said and try to stay as calm as possible, but that probably wouldn't be happening.

Withdraw or Remove Myself. Twenty-one participants' responses (70%) depicted intentionally removing themselves from the situation or attempting to avoid the aggressor. Avoiding the aggressor could be accomplished by going to the employee-only area or leaving the store premises. This theme was noted in response to various scenarios ranging from verbal harassment, sexual harassment, and physical threats from customers and acquaintances. To handle an incident of customer verbal harassment, a 16-year-old female said: "I'd probably just walk away because I just don't feel like I'd be authoritative enough to be like, to like ask them to leave." Similarly, a 17-year-old female participant believed she would respond to any workplace aggression from a personal acquaintance through removing herself from the situation: "If I'm out on the floor, I'd go into the back room."

Quit the Job. This theme reflected the plan of not returning to work until the issue was addressed by management and resolved or quitting the job altogether. Fifteen participants (50%) described this response which was limited to scenarios where a supervisor was the aggressor. The following excerpt was provided by a 16-year-old female:

I don't think I would work there anymore, to be honest. Like, because I mean it's an important position to me, but not so important that I would be willing to put up with [the supervisor] making me feel uncomfortable, or giving me attention in a negative way.

Solicit Support From a Manager. A total of 25 participants (83.3%) reported they would seek support from a manager either to assist in handling workplace aggression or by telling the manager about the incident afterward. One 18-year-old female said she would handle customer sexual harassment by immediately soliciting support from the manager: "Go grab a store manager, explain to him what happened and then have him talk to the person." Likewise, a 17-year-old female participant reported she would handle coworker sexual harassment by informing the manager and asking her to intercede: "Just tell my manager, tell her that they've been doing [sexual harassment] to me. If she could

talk to [the coworker], that would be awesome; or—and ask her if I could just, like, not work with them.”

Solicit Support From a Coworker. Coworkers would be sought by 21 participants (70%) to provide immediate help to handle uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations or for emotional support. A 16-year-old female participant proposed engaging a coworker to help her handle customer sexual harassment: “Ask someone else that he wasn’t coming onto, like, to handle that customer.” In addition to providing immediate assistance, participants proposed having coworkers provide protection from potential aggression. A 17-year-old female reported she would solicit support and protection from coworkers to handle physical threats from a customer: “I would have somebody else there help me handle the [customer]. Uh, like if it was something, like, they were going to see after [work] or something, I’d definitely go with somebody to wherever, like, my car.” Finally in response to verbal harassment from an acquaintance, a 17-year-old female thought she would seek help from her coworkers: “If I’m out on the floor, I’d go into the back room, and then, talk to my coworkers, and be like, ‘Can one of you ask them to leave?’”

Solicit Support From Parent/Family. Family members, primarily parents, were viewed as a potential source of support should workplace aggression occur. Eighteen participants (60%) proposed seeking out family members for support and guidance about additional actions to take to respond to workplace aggression as well as to provide emotional support. Only female participants would solicit support from family. For example, to handle aggression from a supervisor an 18-year-old female said: “I would probably go to my parents first and see what they thought before I brought [supervisor harassment and threats] completely out and open into the workplace.” Another 18-year-old female thought she would seek support and assistance from her parents to handle an incident of customer physical threats of harm: “If the customer said they were going to come back and [physically] hurt me, I would probably have my dad come up to my work and escort me out and make sure I got to my car okay.”

Protect Myself. Eleven participants (36.7%) supposed they would protect themselves using tactics ranging from distancing oneself from the aggressor to using self-defense skills to fight back. These responses were limited to the hypothetical scenarios containing threats of physical harm or actual physical assault from an aggressor. An 18-year-old female participant proposed distancing herself from a customer who’s making physical threats: “I would protect myself. It depends on what they’re doing. If it was like I don’t know if they look like they were ready to punch me, I’d back off and I’d probably, I probably would just walk away.” Use of self-defense tactics was mentioned by a 16-year-old female in response to potential physical assault: “I mean

I’m not that strong, but I know ways to get out of stuff and everything.” Finally, an 18-year-old male believed that he would fight back in self-defense in response to a customer physical assault:

Once [the customer’s] physically assaulted you, then they’ve crossed the line. I mean, for me, in the back of my head, personally, it’s—I mean, if you do anything to harm the customer, you could get fired, especially if it’s physical, but if he hits you first, I mean, you can hit them back or it’s self-defense at that point.

Contrary to the previous responses, a 16-year-old female participant expressed hesitation in taking defensive action:

I would say that if [a customer assaulted me] at work—I’d almost be afraid to hit back or, like, fight back just because I’m at work and I feel like I need to portray some sort of like look for the ice cream store.

Contact Corporate Management. The theme “contact corporate management” describes 15 participants’ (50%) responses stating they would contact corporate-level management to report the incident. This theme was limited to responses addressing workplace aggression from a supervisor. An 18-year-old female proposed response to supervisor sexual harassment was: “I would definitely call corporate, call the store owner because I know him. So they would listen, and they would investigate or call my district manager.” Another 18-year-old female participant proposed responding to supervisor verbal harassment by: “I would possibly email the people from corporate and let them know what’s happening and ask them what they think I should do [about supervisor verbal harassment].”

Intervene Directly With Aggressors. Twenty-four participants (80%) described taking immediate action to directly address the situation through verbally or physically engaging the aggressor. Specific interventions mentioned included telling the aggressor to stop the unwanted behavior, demanding the aggressor leave the premises, or taking action to stop a robbery. A 16-year-old female participant would directly address customer sexual harassment:

If [customers] would try to [sexually] touch me I would probably say ‘This isn’t the time or place to do this. I am 16. You need to stop.’ Or I’d just be like, ‘Please stop!’ like, something like that or ‘That’s inappropriate.’

An 18-year-old male thought he would directly confront the aggressor:

I probably wouldn’t mess around with [physically threatening customers] at all. I’d probably tell them to get the hell out or

we'll have some problems. So, yeah, I don't really mess around with that at all. The niceness pretty much ends.

Several male participants thought they would try to stop a robber. An example of this response came from a 16-year-old male:

Probably try and stop [the criminals] from taking whatever it was" and "I mean I guess it all depends on the situation, like if the [robber] had a gun, I don't know if I would like resist or not . . . I think if I had an opportunity where I felt that I would be able to disarm him, I think I would.

Notify the Authorities. Contacting the authorities—namely the police—by calling 911 to report the workplace aggression incident was mentioned by 22 participants (73.3%). This tactic was frequently seen as part of a response plan to a robbery such as "I would call 911 right away." Participants also mentioned notifying the authorities when customers were perceived to be "out of control" and when presented with hypothetical scenarios of physical threats or physical assault regardless of aggressor. An 18-year-old female participant reported that the first thing she would do in response to a customer assault is:

I would probably call the cops immediately [for physical assault from customers]. I know it is bad to say, but I probably wouldn't even tell who was working with me, but most likely they would see the incident and I would probably just go call the cops immediately. I wouldn't even handle the customer. I would just go straight to the phone.

Another 18-year-old female voiced how her response to notifying the police about a physical assault differed if the aggressor was a coworker versus a supervisor:

I would . . . maybe call the police, I don't know. It's just like, I don't want to press charges on someone that's like 16, but [a supervisor] who's an adult and knows better, it's like, come on. I mean I feel like it's a different situation.

Unable to Formulate a Plan. Some participants responded with "I don't know" or were unsure of how they would respond if confronted with the hypothetical situations despite prompting by the investigator. Six participants (5 female, 1 male; 20%) were uncertain of their response to at least one hypothetical scenario of workplace aggression. Scenarios provoking ambivalent responses included robbery, supervisor verbal harassment, customer and supervisor sexual harassment, and coworker physical assault. An 18-year-old female said she was unsure how she would respond to customer sexual harassment because she had never encountered it:

I have no idea because [customer sexual harassment] would make me really, really mad. Uhm, I don't even know what I would do in that situation. I guess it would just have to happen for me to experience it. I have no idea.

In response to the scenario of supervisor sexual harassment, a 16-year-old female reported she was unsure how she would respond because of not knowing to whom she would report the incident:

If [supervisor sexual harassment] was like really serious—I don't even know what I would do if it was really serious because they're like, you know, they're the top. Who else is there to tell, really? Who else is going to get them into trouble? So I'm not really sure what I'd do in that sense.

Robbery was another hypothetical scenario that produced participant responses of uncertainty. A different 16-year-old female struggled to develop a response and finally responded: "I've never received any education for what to do during a robbery . . . For robbery, like I wouldn't really know what to do."

Discussion

Findings reveal adolescent employees have formulated a plan for how they will respond when faced with future situations of workplace aggression. Themes share similarities with the response strategy categories of problem focused, escape avoidance, and support seeking identified in adult-based workplace aggression studies (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Skinner et al., 2003). Table 2 displays the themes that emerged in relation to these categories. Proposed responses differ based on perpetrator relationship and the act of aggression. Finally, findings demonstrate several proposed responses that could jeopardize personal safety. The following section explores how responses were influenced by perpetrator relationship and type of aggression, how findings compared with previous research, implications for workplace safety, and opportunities for school nurses to address workplace aggression faced by adolescents.

Responses Based on Aggressor Relationship

Customer. Potential incidents of aggression by customers yielded responses such as Tolerate or ignore, Give them what they want, Protect myself, Intervene directly, and Notify the authorities though a few respondents proposed Withdraw or remove myself, Solicit support from supervisor, and Solicit support from coworker. Our findings share similarities with previous studies that report adult employees attempt to diffuse aggressive customers by taking measures to keep the customer happy (Grandey et al., 2007) or by giving into customer demands (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Such problem-focused response strategies may be viewed by employees as a way to preserve a successful business transaction and maintain a customer-oriented environment

Table 2. Qualitative Themes by Category of Response Strategy.

	Categories of Response Strategies	
Problem-Focused	Escape/Avoidance	Support-Seeking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerate or ignore • Give them what they want • Quit the job • Protect myself • Contact corporate management • Intervene directly • Notify the authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdraw or remove myself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit support from supervisor • Solicit support from coworker • Solicit support from parent/family

(Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Similarly, participants' use of Withdrawal or remove myself to handle incidents of customer verbal and sexual harassment was similar to adult employees' responses of avoidance and ignoring customers (Yagil, 2008). Unlike problem-based response strategies, withdraw or avoiding aggressive customers are escape/avoidance strategies that enable the employee to disengage from the customer rather than deal with the workplace aggression directly. Selection of this response may be fight-or-flight response. Therefore, some participants may prioritize the prevention of negative impacts of customer workplace aggression through avoidance rather than preserving the customer-employee relationship as the best plan to preserve personal safety when workplace aggression occurs.

Coworker. Aggressive incidents perpetrated by coworkers yielded proposed responses such as *Tolerate or ignore* and *Intervene directly*. These findings share some similarities with adult workers responses to psychological violence or harassment from coworkers where adults pretend nothing is happening or do not to tell anyone (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2005; Leck & Galperin, 2006; Turte et al., 2012). Sexual harassment from a coworker yielded similar responses with the addition of soliciting support from their supervisor. Conversely, physical threats and assaults from coworkers provoked taking steps such as *Protect myself*, *Intervene directly*, *Contact corporate management*, and *Notify the authorities*. Participants' responses to coworker-perpetrated workplace aggression share similarities with previous findings of adolescents' response to school bullying (deLara, 2008; Elledge et al., 2010; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Response strategies in school bullying literature include telling the bully you do not like it/asking bully to stop, telling an adult, getting a friend to help (Elledge et al., 2010), and doing nothing/ignoring the bully (deLara, 2008; Elledge et al., 2010; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Similarities between our participants' responses to workplace aggression and responses reported in school bullying literature may be due to the peer relationship that may exist between coworkers of similar age. Thus, workplace aggression perpetrated by a coworker might provoke the use

of response strategies viewed as helpful when dealing with other forms of peer aggression such as school bullying.

Supervisor. Verbal or sexual harassment by a supervisor or manager yielded responses of *Contact corporate management* to report the incident, *Quit the job*, and *Solicit support from a parent or family member*. Though a few participants mentioned they might intervene directly by discussing an incident of verbal harassment with the supervisor, most participants' responses were similar to adult employees' responses of avoidance and support seeking (Yagil et al., 2011). It is plausible that participants' proposed responses to handle supervisor workplace aggression are rooted in the nature of supervisor/supervisee relationships and the potential for power imbalances to exist. Researchers have shown that supervisors who openly communicate and respect their employees foster positive employee relationships which can decrease perceived power gaps (Willemyns, Gallois, & Callan, 2003). Conversely, employees who feel disrespected by supervisors report poor employee relationships and amplification of perceived power gaps (Willemyns et al., 2003). As future incidents of supervisor workplace aggression may be viewed as disrespectful and detrimental to one's relationship with a supervisor, adolescent participants may view indirect responses to workplace aggression as the best approach to take.

Acquaintance. Proposed responses to aggressive incidents such as verbal and sexual harassment by acquaintances at the participants' workplace yielded responses of *Withdraw/remove myself* or *Intervene directly*. However, once the workplace aggression escalates to a physical threat or assault, participants' proposed responses reflected a need to preserve personal safety through the addition of strategies such as *Protect myself* and *Notify the authorities*. As previous research regarding adult employee responses to personal issues spilling over into the workplace was not found, adolescents' responses to aggression within dating relationships were explored. U.S. population-based estimates indicate 1 in 5 adolescent females and 1 in 10 adolescent males report experiencing violence in their dating relationship (Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Based on these estimates, it is plausible that adolescent employees may experience the spillover of dating aggression in a workplace setting. High school students whom experienced adolescent dating violence report responding to this form of aggression with aggression, ending the relationship, seeking informal help from friends, and taking no action (Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001). Moreover, when aggression spills over into a workplace setting, adolescent employees' responses may be motivated by the need to prevent the incident from escalating further as it could lead to personal embarrassment or jeopardize their employment. When incidents of dating aggression are witnessed, adolescents feel compelled to talk with the witness to express fear, embarrassment, or to explain why the incident occurred (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008). Though our findings did not reveal talking with a coworker or supervisor witness as a proposed response, it is possible our findings of withdraw or intervene reflect participants' strategy to prevent or minimize a witnessed incident of aggression from taking place.

Responses Based on Type of Aggression

Findings demonstrate differences in proposed responses based on the type of aggressive behaviors. All the forms of aggression except robbery yielded the proposed responses of *Intervene directly* to address the incident. However, some important differences were noted between responses to verbal and sexual harassment and physical threats and assaults. Participants proposed responses to verbal and sexual harassment were more likely to include responses such as *Tolerate or ignore*, *Give them what they want*, and *Withdraw or remove myself*, whereas proposed responses to physical threats or assaults, regardless of the perpetrator, yielded response strategies of *Protect myself* and *Notify the authorities*. These differences may be explained by the degree to which one feels his or her personal safety is being threatened and therefore warrants taking direct action. Similar to proposed responses addressing physical threats and assaults, proposed responses to robbery focus primarily on taking steps to maintain personal safety by giving in to the perpetrator's demands first and then notifying the authorities. Overall proposed responses were appropriate for most workplace aggression incidents; however, some proposed responses were not. Responses such as attempting to disarm a potential robber or fighting back when physically threatened or assaulted demonstrate a lack of priority for one's personal safety and indicate the need for further aggression education and training.

Limitations

The study has several limitations: (1) single employer represented, (2) use of a convenience sampling strategy, and (3) nonrepresentative sample. We attempted to mitigate these

limitations by sampling from several store locations and by continuing to conduct interviews until no new information was identified during data analysis (i.e., data saturation). Due to the nonrepresentative sample, results may not be generalizable to all adolescent workers. However, our findings may be similar to planned responses of adolescent employees working in comparable retail settings.

Implications for School Nurses

Whereas aggressive incidents can occur anywhere and range in intensity from verbal harassment to physical assault, adolescents need to learn how to appraise the situation, select a response to maximize personal safety, and intervene safely when incidents are directly experienced and/or witnessed. According to the National Association of School Nurses (2011), the role of the registered professional school nurse includes, but is not limited to, promoting health education, providing care to students, performing health screening, referring students to appropriate resources, and advocating for a healthy school environment. Thus, it is through these roles that school nurses in conjunction with other school health professionals must seize the opportunity to promote adolescent students' awareness of and appropriate responses to all forms of aggression in a variety of ways.

As school nurses and the other school health professionals have the opportunity to interact with students on a daily basis, activities to address aggression must consist of a variety of approaches including health promotion and education. Our study results indicated that adolescents' responses to aggression may be influenced by factors such as the relationship to the aggressor and the type of aggression experienced. Considering adolescents may encounter various forms of aggression such as school bullying, adolescent dating violence, and workplace aggression, school health professionals should develop and implement a program to educate students on how to prevent, recognize, and safely respond to future acts of aggression. This type of aggression education could be readily integrated into existing health curriculum and provide students with valuable skills to safely respond to all forms of future aggression including workplace aggression.

Students physically injured or emotionally upset by workplace aggression may not seek health care services until the next school day when they seek treatment from a school nurse. It is important for school nurses to document adolescents' descriptions of aggressive incidents in detail as the information may be needed if adolescents later press charges against their aggressors. School nurses may also have a legal obligation in some states or counties to report or confirm that a police report was generated for any physical assaults against a minor.

School health professionals should screen students for employment and assess employed students for workplace

Table 3. Recommended Activities for School Nurses and School Health Professionals to address Workplace Aggression.

Focus	Activities
Health promotion and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a school wide education session among working age students about work readiness, occupational safety, and workplace aggression • Partner with teachers to address workplace aggression in addition to other types of violence exposures in health class curriculum • Hold annual safety fair with assistance by community health nursing students to increase students' awareness of various types of violence exposure • Distribute resource materials to students seeking employment and/or work permit giving them tips to assess potential workplaces for occupational safety concerns (including workplace aggression) • Facilitate a support group for working students
Primary prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct yearly one-on-one session with working students to assess presence of occupational safety hazards at current job and, <i>if necessary</i>, provide counseling on how to address hazards • Provide continuing education session for teachers about signs or symptoms of potential violence exposure and how to refer students to school health team • Serve as a guest speaker in a health education course to address personal safety
Secondary prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with school counselor to screen for workplace aggression exposure among working students with documented changes in performance or behavior at school • Document adolescents' descriptions of aggressive incidents in detail and report to authorities as mandated by law • Refer students suspected of violence exposure to appropriate resources (e.g., primary care provider, counseling)
Advocacy and health policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for and participate in community-school-academic partnership to develop and provide work readiness program • Lobby state legislature to pass a law requiring those under age 18 to complete a work readiness program prior to obtaining work permit and entering the workforce

aggression exposure. Screening questions should ask if the student has ever experienced workplace aggression using the various combination of aggressors (i.e., customer, coworker, supervisor, personal acquaintance) and acts of aggression (i.e., verbal harassment, sexual harassment, threat of physical violence, physical assault) presented in this study. An affirmative response to any of the items would indicate a positive screen for workplace aggression exposure and warrant a referral to the student's primary care provider as well as encouraging the student to officially report the event to proper authorities such as the employer and local police. Students emotionally upset may need a referral to the school counselor for further assessment and potential emotional therapy. It would also be prudent to keep a roster of key employers that hire adolescents along with contact information for their human resources representatives and their specific policies for workplace aggression, workplace injuries, and reporting requirements. Based on the employer policies, school nurses may need to refer injured students to the employee/occupational health clinic for a follow-up assessment.

Finally, if a school-wide assessment demonstrates students are working, school health professionals should consider facilitating support groups for working students to share knowledge, experiences, and concerns with other working students. Additional activities we recommend to address the issue of workplace aggression among current and future working age students in their particular school and surrounding community are displayed in Table 3.

Conclusion

This study was the first to explore adolescent employees' plans to respond to future workplace aggression. Categories of proposed responses to future workplace aggression were similar to those reported by adolescent victims of school bullying, adolescent dating violence, and adult victims of workplace violence. Future efforts need to be focused on educating and training students about to enter the workplace about workplace aggression and how to safely and appropriately respond. To address this need, it is recommended that school nurses implement a variety of activities to address all forms of aggression and workplace aggression in particular. Furthermore, it is recommended that school health professionals advocate for and participate in the creation of a community-school-academic partnership to address the issue of work readiness and occupational safety in a collaborative fashion among school administrators, community agencies, employers, parents, and adolescents. Future research needs to be conducted to evaluate the model of partnership and its ability to effectively deliver work readiness training to adolescents. Finally, school nurses must seize the opportunity to play an integral part as health promoters and educators to address adolescents' responses to future aggression regardless the context.

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Author Biographies

Carolyn R. Smith, PhD, RN, is a visiting assistant professor at College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA.

Bonnie S. Fisher, PhD, is a professor at College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA.

Gordon L. Gillespie, PhD, PHCNS-BC, FAEN, is an assistant professor and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholar at College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA.

Theresa A. Beery, PhD, RN, ACNP, is a professor and Director of the Center for Educational Research, Scholarship, and Innovation at College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA.

Donna M. Gates, EdD, RN, FAAN, is an adjunct professor at College of Nursing, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA.