



## Interview with Dr Lisa Warren



*Dr Lisa Warren is a registered Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, and an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychiatry at Monash University. Her field of expertise is behavioural risk management and the management of those who persistently aggress. This includes those who stalk, bully, harass, threaten and persistently misuse complaints processes.*

### ***What is and isn't the role of educators in responding to students who are behaving aggressively?***

While aggression can almost feel understandable when a person is distressed, sleep deprived, going through change or even mentally ill, under no circumstance is it acceptable. In no educators' job description will it have written down that you are required to put up with people being aggressive to you, it's just not part of your job. It is part of your job to nurture and to refer people who are behaving poorly to those who can unpack that behaviour and help them skill themselves up in stressful or difficult circumstances, because most of the time aggression is about being out of skills.

### ***What advice do you have for teachers when responding to students who are behaving aggressively?***

When you encounter a person who's being aggressive, I've always found it helpful to try as best as possible to separate out what the person's trying to tell you, from the way in which they're delivering their message. Aggression is a form of communicating. It's an adult way of stamping your foot and saying '*I need you to hear this, this is really actually pretty important to me.*' If you're trying to manage aggression in a face-to-face situation, one of the best ways is to stop, label the behaviour and say '*this needs to stop now, I'd like to hear you but you need to describe this in a different way.*'

If the aggression is received via phone or via e-mail, or increasingly we see aggressive criticisms and threats occurring on social media, again a similar message needs to be given. A direct message back saying '*this is not acceptable, I actually want to hear what you've got to say but you've got to describe it in a different way.*' Early intervention, we've found, works really well.

In practice though, what we often see is people doing exactly the opposite. When someone's aggressive it's awkward, it's scary and people tend to ignore it, smooth it over, not make a fuss, just try to continue on with the conversation as though it's not happening. While that can intuitively feel like a reasonable thing to do, not only does it give permission for that to be acceptable behaviour, what it can also do is frustrate the aggressive person if they don't think you're taking them seriously. Sometimes what we've seen is this sort of approach actually escalates things rather than contains things, because the person feels like they haven't been heard and they haven't been taken seriously.

### *How should teachers respond to students who are upset about their marks?*

When a student challenges a mark or a grade it can be a challenging situation because the student is, sometimes, not willing to see that it is a skill deficit on their part, it's not a personal insult. I've found the best way of doing that is again being able to separate out the message from the delivery of the message. Acknowledging that it's awful to receive a bad grade, particularly when you've put a lot of work into the assignment and your expectation was not met. Being able to agree with that: it's a distressing thing, it's a confusing thing, and it can feel like a personal failure or a personal insult. There's nothing that a teacher should do beyond usual protocol.