# Factsheet – Fight, flight and freeze

The terminology ‘fight or flight’ was first introduced by Walter Bradford Cannon in 1929 to explain how the body reacts to threats by preparing to confront or escape them. The concept of ‘freeze’ was added in the 90s, recognising that individuals may also respond to threats by freezing or becoming immobile. This addition to the model came from advancements in psychology and trauma studies. It acknowledges that the freeze response is another adaptive survival mechanism, alongside fighting and fleeing (Walters 2020).

The body’s primal response to danger (perceived or real) is to automatically initiate a protective response and puts the body into survival mode. This causes changes in the body, such as:

* pulse and heart rate increases
* pupils dilate
* faster breathing rate
* blood flow is redirected to the muscles in preparation for action
* the body releases a surge of adrenaline to give the body energy and releases cortisol to relieve pain.

These hormone surges can block rational thinking. Most importantly, people have no choice as to which response the body utilises in the moment, and this can change depending on what is being experienced. Moving through different responses during the same experience is also possible. For example, if attempts at ‘flight’ are not possible, a response may automatically move to fight.

Table 1 – examples of fight, flight, freeze in the classroom

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fight | Flight | Freeze |
| A student’s fight response might look like:   * panicking or being visibly anxious * being irritable * getting into an argument or being defensive * clenching fists * attempting to punch or cause destruction * raising voice in an aggressive tone * displaying an overly competitive attitude * becoming physically aggressive (particularly younger students), for example, by biting or scratching. | A student’s flight response might look like:   * fidgeting, shaking * darting eyes * becoming avoidant by pretending they can’t hear you or avoids engagement * running away or out of the classroom * hiding * putting distance between self and perceived danger. | A student’s freeze response might look like:   * shutting down * being indecisive * acting dazed or distracted and may struggle starting tasks * being passive or unresponsive (looks physically immobile as if they can’t move or their body is heavy) * going tense, still and silent * verbally unresponsive or saying “I don’t know” a lot. |

Other terms used to describe responses to stress also exist that are less commonly used but are increasing in use in school communities. The Australian Childhood Foundation uses the terms ‘Fawn/Friend/Appease’ to describe how a child or young person might try to make someone happy or attempt to befriend them to avoid conflict or danger. This could involve telling adults what they want to hear, taking blame for others’ actions, or relying on others to make decisions for them (Australian Childhood Foundation 2022). More recently, another ‘F’ has been added, ‘Flop’. ‘Flop’ is when the initial response may be to freeze, but then the muscle responsiveness is lost and the whole body becomes floppy and unable to respond to danger (Farrington and Woodward 2024).

Some students, particularly those who have experienced trauma, may have an overactive stress response and their body is more likely to activate the fight, flight or freeze response in the future. This means that students who have gone through trauma may be more likely to enter fight, flight, or freeze mode even when there’s no real danger in the classroom.

If you think a student’s behaviour could be due to an activated fight, flight, freeze, friend or flop response, then there are several ways you can approach it to help calm the student rather than triggering them further. Facilitating physical and emotional safety through a trauma-informed approach is important, by prioritising empathy, safety, predictability and positive relationships. This might include:

* ensuring safety of the student, their peers, staff and yourself
* de-escalating the situation by supporting the student to feel calm through co-regulation and using strategies which will support the student to slow their heartrate and breathing
* responding after an incident to support the wellbeing of students and staff
* reflecting on an incident and planning for both you and the student to manage their emotions in the future
* reporting and recording the incident as required.

When the behaviours of concern are identified as a significant work health and safety risk to other students, staff or property, further steps including a **Student tailored risk management plan** may be required to support the management of the identified risks. All incidents involving high risk-taking behaviour exhibited by students must be reported to the [Incident Report and Support Hotline](https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/health-and-safety/incident-emergency-management/respond-report/incident-reporting) on 1800 811 523.

Watching a student experience an intense response to stress can be challenging. The department’s [Employee Assistance Program (EAP)](https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/health-and-safety/staff-wellbeing/employee-assistance-program--eap-) supports the health and wellbeing of staff by providing free independent and confidential counselling services.

## References

Australian Childhood Foundation (2022) [*Trauma Expression & Connection Assessment (TECA)*](https://professionals.childhood.org.au/prosody/2022/03/trauma-expression-and-connection-assessment/), Australian Childhood Foundation, accessed 17 October 2024.

Farrington S and Woodward A (2024) The Psychology of Trauma, 1st edn, Routledge, London.

Walters S (2020) [*Understanding Stress*](https://psychology.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/12-3-understanding-stress/)*,* Psychology 1st Canadian Edition, Thompson Rivers University, accessed 17 October 2024.

**The following works informed the content of this factsheet.**

Calm Classroom (21 March 2022) ‘[Fight, Flight, or Freeze in Schools: How to Recognize Stress Responses](https://blog.calmclassroom.com/fight-flight-freeze-in-schools)’, Calm Classroom, accessed 17 October 2024.

Fisher J (2021) [*Supporting students through the fight, flight or freeze response*](https://www.3plearning.com/blog/supporting-students-through-the-fight-flight-or-freeze-response/), 3P Learning, accessed 17 October 2024.

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