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Anger management for adolescents in the school setting

Abstract

The first purpose of this research paper will be to discuss what might be some of the origins of adolescent anger, as well as what specifically might provoke it. The discussion will center on such topics as family systems and how they react to anger displays, as well as social contexts in relation to anger. Second, this paper will include descriptions of several anger management programs which could be used in a school setting with adolescents. Specifically, it will include an overview of some of the most widely used programs, such as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, small group counseling, active relaxation, and computer-based instruction.

ANGER MANAGEMENT FOR ADOLESCENTS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

A Research Paper

Presented to

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and Postsecondary Education
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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by

Meri A. Edel

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Anger is a common word in the English language, yet a precise definition is often elusive. According to Novaco (1975), anger is an emotional response to being provoked, which may or may not lead to aggressive acts. Similarly, Bradshaw and Lerner (as cited in Marion, 1994) noted that anger is an emotion, an affective state, or a feeling. It is most often felt when certain needs are frustrated or when well-being is threatened. Many times, the resultant emotional energy leads to attempts to remedy the situation that brought on the anger. Moon and Eisler (1983) defined anger as a covert response to stressors which often leads to inappropriate coping behaviors. It is these coping strategies or attempts at resolving anger-provoking situations are frequently troublesome, especially among teens.

Any professional who works with adolescents in a school setting knows that anger and anger control are major problems for young people today. Often, anger and a lack of knowledge about how to control it cause teens to display unacceptable and violent behaviors. These behaviors can frequently cause disruptions in the learning environment (Phillips-Hershey & Kanagy, 1996). The same behaviors, in turn, may lead adults to label students as chronic discipline problems whose time is better spent in the principal's office than in a classroom. Students being punished in the principal's office do not usually learn effective methods to cope with and control their anger. However, recent events in this nation's public schools would suggest that it is crucial for adolescents to learn and practice anger management skills.

Recent school shootings and incidents of violence have drawn much attention in the popular media. Members of the general public have questioned the

safety of schools and demanded that schools take a more active role in responding to students displaying aggressive and hostile behavior. It is true that school personnel do need to have policies in place to deal with violent or potentially violent individuals, but what could be even more effective and far-reaching is to give students the tools necessary to manage their anger before it erupts into violence. In fact, in the 1998 Annual Report on School Safety, Secretary of Education Richard Riley and Attorney General Janet Reno recommended that all schools "implement schoolwide education and training on avoiding and preventing violence" (United States Department of Education & United States Department of Justice, 1998, p. 27). As a part of reducing violence in the schools, they encouraged school personnel to offer skills training in such areas as problem solving, communication, conflict resolution, peer mediation, and anger management. Anger management programs could be an excellent preventive measure for school personnel to employ in order to reduce student violence. Therefore, anger management in the schools is a topic which warrants further investigation.

The first purpose of this research paper will be to discuss what might be some of the origins of adolescent anger, as well as what specifically might provoke it. The discussion will center on such topics as family systems and how they react to anger displays, as well as social contexts in relation to anger.

Second, this paper will include descriptions of several anger management programs which could be used in a school setting with adolescents. Specifically, it will include an overview of some of the most widely used programs, such as

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, small group counseling, active relaxation, and computer-based instruction.

Possible Origins of Adolescent Anger

There are many different theories as to how anger originates in young people. Researchers have examined various possibilities when trying to determine exactly how children and young adolescents develop in the emotionally. Following is a discussion of two of the more prevalent ideas about the origin of adolescent anger, specifically addressing the role both parents and early socialization experiences play.

The Role of Parents

Family members, especially parents, play a large role in how children develop emotionally. Parents provide direct instruction in how to recognize, label, and deal with emotions; serve as role models for emotional socialization; and are often the cause of many emotional reactions in children (DeBaryshe & Fryxell, 1998). How parents meet the challenges of their important role in the emotional lives of their children is critical. Early in their lives, children learn what they believe to be the rules of emotions and how to regulate them. These rules usually follow them into adulthood, sometimes with undesirable outcomes. Gelinas (1979) suggested that early painful emotional experiences can lead to serious psychological problems in adolescence and adulthood unless individuals strive to understand the nature of their anger and find suitable outlets for it. Parents can be instrumental in helping their children manage painful emotions, specifically anger, effectively.

Gottman and DeClaire (as cited in DeBaryshe & Fryxell, 1998) identified four distinct styles of parenting in reaction to children's negative emotions. Disapproving parents are punitive and highly critical of displays of "negative" emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness, and shame. Dismissing parents ignore their children's "negative" emotions, often feeling that they are a reflection on the parent. Laissez faire parents accept "negative" emotions, but do not give their children any guidance in dealing with them. Ideally, parents serve as emotional coaches for their children. They accept "negative" emotions and teach their children labels for their feelings. They also help their children find acceptable ways for handling their emotions, staying within reasonable social limits.

Obviously, children do not have the luxury of choosing the parenting style with which they are raised. They also cannot control the degree to which they witness anger early in their lives, but researchers have offered evidence to suggest that the amount and type of anger and conflict, especially intermarital, that children observe helps to shape their own anger styles later in life. For example, Grych and Fincham (as cited in DeBaryshe & Fryxell, 1998) found that children exposed to frequent conflicts and parental displays of anger often show more "negative" emotions as early adolescents. Thus, it is essential that parents take an active role in developing healthy emotional habits early in the lives of children. Sometimes healthy habits, fostered and nurtured by parents serving as emotional coaches, can help to offset some of the anger patterns which might result from socialization experiences with peers.

Social Contexts

Most children have their first socialization experiences within the family, specifically with their parents. They learn how to recognize, label, and display their emotions early in life and are then faced with the challenge of testing these emotional rules among their peers. Zeman and Shipman (1997) indicated that social context plays an extremely important role in children's and adolescents' emotion management decisions.

In their comprehensive study which examined many aspects of emotion and its expression, Zeman and Shipman (1997) found that children and early adolescents who openly express a lot of anger and act out in an aggressive and hostile manner are frequently rejected by their peers. They also suggested that peers often respond to anger expressions by seeking revenge and acting out counteraggressively or by ending the relationship altogether. This is congruent with the findings of Swaffer and Hollin (1997), who noted that many times adolescents respond to anger by acting out in an effort to prove that they cannot be intimidated by others who they might perceive to be a threat. Whether by direct experience or observation, young people learn "rules" about expressing anger with their peers. These "rules" may or may not match the rules already established by interactions with their parents. When there is a discrepancy, adolescents are forced to decide which script they will ultimately follow.

Some children and adolescents decide how to express their anger based solely on who will witness the display. Underwood, Coie, and Herbsman (1992) stated that young people generally do not act out anger toward authority figures,

because they perceive that to be more dangerous and less socially acceptable than acting out against peers. In fact, many times anger toward authority figures, such as teachers, will be transformed into sadness. Children and adolescents are more likely to display genuine anger toward peers or classmates, because it is more socially acceptable and also more apt to have a real impact. In contrast, children and adolescents appear less likely to display anger toward peers they perceive to be close friends (Whitesell & Harter, 1996). It seems that children and adolescents may be more willing to risk the consequences of acting out anger toward peers than toward adults or close friends. This may be because amongst children they perceive as merely classmates, rather than friends, they feel they have some recourse for their anger.

Anger Management Programs for the School Setting

It is clear that anger patterns are learned early on and that there is a definite influence by both parents and peers as to how those patterns are developed. Once children reach early adolescence, they have likely experienced anger in some form. By this time, many teens have already established habits of anger which are problematic, especially in the school setting. At this point, it is beneficial for school personnel, specifically teachers, counselors, and administrators, to get involved and help students learn to manage their anger effectively and constructively in order for school to be a physically and emotionally safe environment for learning to take place.

There are a variety of anger management programs and techniques which could feasibly be employed in the schools. Following is a discussion of several of the more prominent programs, sampling areas such as Rational Emotive Behavior

Therapy, small group counseling, progressive relaxation, and computer-based instruction.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)

Albert Ellis originated REBT in 1955 as a form of therapeutic treatment that he asserted was more effective and efficient than the traditional psychoanalysis of the time. Since then, thousands of therapists and school counselors have adopted Ellis' philosophies and techniques into their own practices (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997). The beauty of REBT is that it is easy to learn, and most individuals, even adolescents, can practice the techniques on themselves without the aid of a therapist, once they are given proper instruction (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997).

The initial phase in using REBT to manage anger involves looking at what Ellis refers to as the ABCs of REBT (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997). Ellis recommended beginning an anger management program by examining C, which represents the emotional or behavioral consequence, in this case anger. Then he suggested a move to examine A, which is the activating experience or adversity. Ellis emphasized that it is essential for people understand that while A, the activating event, may affect C, the consequence, there is not a cause and effect relationship between the two. In other words, if one teen, Jim, made a rude comment toward another, Sue, and Sue became angry, that does not imply the rude comment caused Sue's anger. Rather, it is what happened between A and C that caused the anger. The key to anger management is intervening at B, which represents the belief system. That is to say, anger (C) is caused by beliefs (B) about the activating event (A).

By employing the ABC system to control and manage anger, adolescents can be taught that they have a large measure of power and choice over their beliefs, and, in turn, any consequences of those beliefs. Ellis (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997) divided beliefs into two basic categories: rational and irrational. The rational beliefs are usually self-helping, accurate, and realistic, whereas the irrational beliefs are most often self-sabotaging, unrealistic exaggerations that lead to unhealthy negative emotional consequences. Again, according to REBT, in order to change feelings and actions, people must change beliefs.

The process of changing a belief system involves examining previously established beliefs and replacing those determined to be irrational or self-defeating with ones which are more rational and self-helping. For adolescents to do this, they must be taught to be reflective and to use the technique of self-talk. For instance, in the earlier example involving Jim and Sue, the two teenagers, Sue would have to examine her beliefs about Jim and his comment to achieve a healthy consequence. If Sue tells herself that it is awful that Jim speaks that way, that he is a terrible person who needs to be punished, and that she cannot stand it when he says those things, she will probably feel the unhealthy negative emotion of anger due to those irrational beliefs. Rather, Sue can tell herself that it is not enjoyable when Jim speaks that way, but it is not necessarily awful, that Jim is not a terrible person, just one who is treating others unkindly, and that though she does not like what Jim says, she can probably stand it. These more rational beliefs will then lead to more healthy and workable negative emotions, such as disappointment and frustration.

Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy is frequently used by therapists and their clients as a method for anger control (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997). It is reasonable to suggest that it could easily be employed in schools as well. School counselors could make an anger control program part of the regular classroom guidance curriculum, and REBT could easily be adapted for use with students displaying all degrees of anger. If it is not feasible for school counselors to put an anger management program into place, it could certainly be delivered by classroom teachers, after some training by counselors. Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy as a method for anger control is an excellent place to start an anger management program with children and adolescents in the schools

Small Group Counseling

Some students display more anger than their peers. They may be verbally abusive to those around them, they may destroy property, or they may make attempts to harm themselves. Adolescents who display high levels of anger could benefit from some anger management programs which extend beyond the regular classroom curriculum. Using a small group counseling strategy teaches high-anger children and adolescents to behave in less aggressive and hostile ways as a reaction to their anger (Omizo, Hershberger, & Omizo, 1988). Small group counseling offers more direct and individualized instruction in anger management and has the added benefit of allowing students to interact with others who experience anger in a similar fashion.

There are countless ways for school counselors to go about structuring a small group for anger management. If counselors already have REBT in place in the classroom, they could offer small groups which are basically more intense and

focused REBT training. Counselors can also purchase pre-written small group lessons from any number of sources, such as Paperbacks for Educators, Suburst Publications, or Western Psychological Services, to name only a few. The following discussion highlights two such curriculums, which are readily available to school personnel, recognizing that it would be virtually impossible to look at all the curriculums designed to be implemented in small groups for anger management which are currently available.

The first small group, Anger Management for Youth (1994), was developed by Dr. Leona Eggert of The University of Washington, Seattle. Its psychoeducational focus is on improving anger management and curbing violence and aggression through changing thoughts and feelings about anger, similar to REBT.

Anger Management for Youth (Eggert, 1994) is divided into several modules. Each module includes an introductory phase; a phase focused on getting to know anger sequences; two phases centered on taking control of anger responses; and the final phase of applying anger control at home, school, work, and in personal relationships. Each phase is then broken down into group sessions. The lessons are written in a very detailed fashion, giving group leaders an actual script for what to say in each session, if they choose to use it.

One of the most beneficial aspects of a small group which employs this program is that in each session, group members are provided with tangible tools to manage their anger. For example, in the fourth module, which deals with taking control of anger responses, a strategy called COPING is presented. This strategy

outlines six steps for anger control, using the word "coping" as a mnemonic device to remember the sequence of steps.

In COPING, the C stands for "calm down." Students are instructed to begin responding to their anger by first calming down in order to think more clearly. The O stands for "opt for control." Here students examine what could happen as a result of losing control. The P stands for "prepare, problem-solve, and plan." This is the most crucial step, where students are instructed to use past knowledge to plan a healthy course of action for responding to their anger. The I stands for "identify and invite alternatives." Here group members need to look at the wide range of possibilities before them. Next is N, which represents "name your feelings; negotiate." In this step, students are reminded that naming the feeling of anger can be a reminder to negotiate instead of exploding. This can lead to more satisfactory consequences. The last step in this strategy is G, which stands for "get on with the plan." This encourages students to carry out the anger management plans that they make and to praise themselves for their effort (Eggert, 1994).

Each module, phase, and session in Anger Management for Youth (Eggert, 1994) is written in a very detailed fashion. They contain strategies and activities help students practice anger management and be self-reflective. Additionally, there are many opportunities built in for students to talk with one another, and for the group leader to foster a sense of belonging, which appears to be critical for adolescents.

On the whole, using the Anger Management for Youth (Eggert, 1994) program to conduct a small group for adolescents is quite feasible within the

school setting and would most likely meet with success. There is evidence to suggest that at the end of the program, students who participated showed a marked decrease in anger-control problems, when compared to a control group of their peers (Eggert, Herting, Thompson, & Nicholas as cited in Eggert, 1994).

Another noteworthy small group designed to improve anger management comes from Rosemarie Smead Morganett of Indiana University Southeast in her book entitled Skills for Living: Group Counseling Activities for Young Adolescents (1990). Each of Morganett's groups are divided into eight sessions, the first being a getting acquainted session, and the last being a saying good-bye session. The middle six sessions are focused on building skills to help adolescents develop and practice anger management techniques. As in Anger Management for Youth (Eggert, 1994), Morganett's Skills for Living (1990) is written in a very detailed fashion, providing the group leader with all the necessary elements to conduct a successful group.

Each session lists the goals of the session, the necessary materials, a review from the previous session, a working activity for the session, and closing time activities which may include some form of homework. It is during the working time that group members are given the opportunity to learn new anger management skills.

For example, in one of Morganett's (1990) sessions called "Appropriate or Inappropriate," she outlined an activity in which the leader asks students to offer opinions about ways to express anger. As a group, students brainstorm a list of both appropriate and inappropriate ways to express anger. In looking at appropriate ways to express anger, students are given direct instruction on how to

use "I-messages" to express their justifiable anger in an honest and straightforward manner. Then, students discuss what the consequences of expressing anger appropriately versus inappropriately might be. Hopefully, in this exercise students come to realize that usually expressing anger appropriately is in their own best interest, since it often meets with better consequences (Morganett, 1990).

During closing time in many of Morganett's (1990) sessions, the leader distributes homework to the group members, affording them the opportunity to practice anger management skills outside of the group setting. Along with the above activity, students keep "anger logs" during the time between the sessions. Students fill out a log sheet each time they become angry, noting who was involved in the situation, evaluating their level of anger, making a plan for responding, deciding whether the response is appropriate or inappropriate, and predicting consequences (Morganett, 1990). Homework such as this anger log emphasizes the idea that the skills learned in the small group counseling sessions can be transferred to other settings and should have a lasting impact.

All of the small groups in Morganett's Skills for Living (1990) were specifically designed for school counselors to use within the school setting. Both of the groups highlighted here would be excellent to include as a step beyond regular classroom instruction in a school's overall plan for helping students to better manage their anger.

Progressive Relaxation

All students can benefit from general instruction on anger management. This instruction best takes place during classroom guidance, perhaps in the context of discussing feelings in general (Kreidler, 1996). Some high anger adolescents

may need instruction beyond what is offered in the classroom setting, and small group counseling can certainly offer that. There are also students for whom general classroom guidance and even small groups are not sufficient. If students have many problems with their anger control, they may well need to receive individual counseling, along with the two interventions mentioned above. During individual counseling sessions, the school counselor could instruct adolescents in some relaxation methods to further control their anger.

Jerry L. Deffenbacher (Deffenbacher & Stark, 1992; Deffenbacher, Lynch, Oetting, & Kemper, 1996; Deffenbacher, Story, Brandon, Hogg, & Hazaleus, 1988), along with many of his colleagues, has worked extensively with individuals of all ages to employ cognitive-relaxation coping skills (CRCS) as a method of controlling anger. Deffenbacher's treatment plan for using CRCS was originally written for adults in a small group setting, but can easily be adapted for individual work with adolescents (Deffenbacher et al., 1996).

Cognitive-relaxation coping skills training involves at least four steps, which are usually taught in sequence and require some degree of practice to perfect. The first step in CRCS is deep breathing cued relaxation. Here, individuals are instructed take three to five deep breaths. Then they consciously make an effort to relax their entire bodies at every third to fifth exhalation. In the second step, students focus on relaxing without tension. They are to focus on each of their muscles and try to relax and release tension from them. The third step involves cue-controlled relaxation. Here, the students use the word "relax" as their cue and concentrate on relaxing with each slow repetition of the word. In the last step, students use visualization to relax. They create their own personal relaxation

imagery and focus on that scene in order to further relax their bodies (Deffenbacher & Stark, 1992).

Once students have learned the steps for CRCS and practiced them within the confines of the counselor's office, they are then ready to apply them to the real anger-provoking situations they may encounter. In order to do this, students practice the techniques with personal anger scenes. For example, the counselor may ask students to visualize an angering event that was left unresolved or one where they were not allowed to express the anger they felt. The goal is for students to experience anger arousal and then rehearse using CRCS to reduce the anger. After practice on this level with the counselor, students are prepared to use these methods to control anger in their everyday lives (Deffenbacher et al., 1996; Deffenbacher & Stark, 1992).

There is an abundance of evidence to suggest that CRCS is an effective method for reducing anger (Deffenbacher et al., 1988; Deffenbacher & Stark, 1992). It has been shown to significantly reduce reported general anger, anger across many provocations, and anger in the personally most angering situations for high-anger individuals (Deffenbacher et al., 1988). Many students trained in the use of CRCS have reported that this method is quite helpful in both reducing levels of anger arousal and also reducing the tendency to respond negatively in anger situations (Deffenbacher & Stark, 1992).

An added benefit of CRCS is that it is economical and practical to use in the school setting (Deffenbacher et al., 1996). It does not require the purchase of many materials, a lot of space, or even a substantial amount of time. Cognitive-relaxation coping skills training would be an excellent element to incorporate into

the school counseling program, especially for working with adolescents who are at risk for acting out. It not only provides tools for high-anger youths to use in an effort to cope with immediate anger, but also could serve to reduce the potential for future anger-related problems, such as interpersonal aggression, delinquency, and even substance abuse (Deffenbacher et al., 1996).

Computer-Based Instruction

In addition to general classroom guidance, small groups, and individual counseling, some adolescents in the school setting can benefit from anger-management programs which are highly engaging, non-threatening, and allow for independent work. Computer-based instruction is an integral part of many academic programs, and it could be just as useful in emotional education as it is in the other areas. One comprehensive computer program which focuses on anger management, dispute resolution, and perspective taking is SMART Talk (Bosworth, Espelage, & DuBay, 1998).

SMART Talk uses games, simulations, cartoons, animation, and interactive interviews to allow students to learn about and practice anger management, conflict resolution, and perspective taking. Each of these three modules is divided into six lessons, which are best worked through in sequence, although they can each be stand-alone lessons.

The anger management module is based on anger replacement therapy. In it, students work through activities which help them learn about the anger cycle and identify situations and events which are most likely to trigger their anger. They also learn seven methods to de-escalate their anger in a session called "Anger

Busters." Lastly, in "Channel Surfin'," students practice anger management skills in a game-like format.

The dispute resolution module of SMART Talk uses the branching and interactive capabilities of the computer to allow students to guide two adolescents in conflict through a problem-solving process. Students have the opportunity to reach consensus on how to best resolve the conflict and have an actual plan for resolution printed out. Additionally, two students who are actually in the midst of a conflict can use the program to work out their differences (Bosworth et al., 1998).

In the perspective-taking module, students watch four celebrities talk about how they personally resolve disputes and manage stress in their own lives and relationships. Students also listen to the celebrities explain how they handle their anger and resolve conflict with others (Bosworth et al., 1998).

The pilot test of SMART Talk program showed it to be popular among students. Close to one hundred seventh graders in a middle school had the chance to use the program in their school's computer lab. The students demonstrated a high degree of acceptance for the program and seemed to be extremely attracted to its technological complexities. In fact, 95% of the seventh graders were interested enough in the program to attempt the sophisticated anger management game called "Channel Surfin'" (Bosworth et al., 1998).

In addition, through the SMART Talk program, students increased their anger reduction vocabulary and their knowledge about how to react to and resolve conflict situations. The increase in vocabulary was demonstrated through the use of a pretest and a posttest where students were asked to define such terms as

"trigger" and "short fuse." In demonstrating their knowledge about resolving conflicts after using SMART Talk, two-thirds of the seventh graders surveyed believed that discussion when one is angry can de-escalate a conflict. This is an improvement because prior to using SMART Talk, less than half of the seventh graders recognized that physical fighting might actually increase a conflict (Bosworth et al., 1998).

Even though SMART Talk has only been pilot tested thus far, and more studies are currently underway to examine its viability for all teens, it seems to be quite feasible to use in the school setting with adolescents. Teens are attracted to the multimedia approach, and this program could provide a valuable tool in reducing anger, conflict, and violence in the schools. SMART Talk could be an excellent complement to a school's overall anger management curriculum.

Conclusion

Clearly, with open conflict on the rise in the world today, it is important to give young people the tools necessary to manage personal anger effectively before it explodes into violence. Despite the fact that adolescents learn their anger patterns early, through experiences with their families and young peers, it is never too late for adults working in the schools to provide programs for teens to learn anger management.

In addition to the necessary policies and procedures for dealing with aggressive and hostile students, every school should have some type of anger management curriculum in place as a measure to prevent violence before it even begins. A comprehensive anger management curriculum should include classroom guidance, possibly using Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. Small group

counseling, perhaps using Anger Management for Youth (Eggert, 1994) or Skills for Living (Morganett, 1990), should also be implemented for teens displaying a high degree of anger. There should also be opportunities for individual counseling, possibly using cognitive-relaxation coping skills, for those students who need additional work on anger management. Lastly, a school's anger management curriculum could even include a multimedia approach such as SMART Talk to reach a wide variety of adolescents.

All adolescents experience anger to some degree. This is a fact which is never going to change, as the experience of anger is quite normal. Problems arise when adolescents are unable to find suitable outlets for their anger and are left to resort to acts of violence, often inflicted in the school setting. If all children and adolescents were exposed at an early age to effective anger management programs, which incorporate the acquisition of knowledge with the practicing of techniques, perhaps the headlines would not read as they do today.

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