



12-6-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Esterline, Brittany, "The Importance of Anger Management Programs in Elementary Schools" (2013).  
*Honors Theses*. 2370.

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# The Importance of Anger Management in Elementary Schools

Brittany Esterline

12/05/2013

Once again little 8-year old Johnny is in the principle's office. It is the third time his teacher sent him there this week. Johnny is a first-grade student who struggles with many behavioral issues. He has a quick temper when he does not get his way. He often throws his chair or hits other students during an anger episode. He is also impulsive, often blurting out his answers in class and jumping out of his seat. Although his teacher has explained to Johnny that his behavior is inappropriate, his poor behavior continues to be a disruption in class.

In order to keep other students in Johnny's class safe and on task, his teacher sends him to the principal's office when he is being disruptive. Although that temporarily fixes the problem, it does not provide a solution to Johnny's behavioral issues. By removing Johnny from the classroom, it removes him from his education and prevents him from learning how to properly handle his anger. Unless Johnny learns how to cope with his anger in a healthy way, he will continue falling behind in his education and his behavioral problems will persist. In order to help children struggling with anger issues, anger management programs should be implemented in every elementary school. By helping a child cope with their anger issues, it is more likely that child will succeed in life.

“According to information obtained by the Learning First Alliance, 15 percent of students are only able to fit into an academic environment if they are provided with moderate assistance in school, such as anger management, conflict resolution, and social skills training” (Reid, 2002). For students like Johnny, coping with anger in childhood can be quite difficult.

“Children and adolescents may not possess the skills to adequately understand and manage feelings of anger and emotions. The confusion and inability to express feelings of anger appropriately may lead to behavioral outbursts, bullying, and other externalizing or disruptive behaviors. These behaviors are often exhibited during the school day when children encounter

difficulties with peers and academic demands” (Candelaria, Fedewa & Ahn, 2012). In order to help children struggling with anger issues, anger management programs should be implemented in every elementary school.

“Anger management is the process of learning how to recognize signs of anger, and taking action to calm down and deal with the situation in a positive way” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011). An anger management program in a school does not prevent a child from having an anger episode; it teaches the child how to handle their anger in an appropriate way.

“When someone can help a student understand the issues behind his or her anger, it becomes possible to deal with the root causes. When students understand how they use anger to deal with other issues, they can be taught alternative behaviors to deal with their feelings” (Openshaw, 2008). When a child is able to understand their behavior and cope with it in a healthy way, that is when the anger management has been successful. In order for an anger management program to be successful in a school, it is important for the facilitator of the group – which could include the school counselor, psychologist, or social worker – and teachers to understand what it means to be angry, the many negative effects of anger, the causes of anger, how children respond to anger, and the cycle of anger.

Anger is a universal feeling. Everyone has felt angry at some point, some people more than others. There are many definitions of anger. Perhaps the simplest definition can be found in the Oxford Dictionary: “Anger is a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility” (Anger, 2013).

Although that is a simple definition, anger as an emotion is actually quite complex. Anger is also an intense signal emotion. It informs us when we are unhappy, when we are not satisfied with our world, when we are in danger or feel violated. “Anger is an emotion that is often created

by the discrepancy between our expectations and our reality. It is what we hope for verses what we actually get” (Rosenthal, 1994). Anger should not always be considered a negative emotion. It is a healthy and natural emotion that should be explored, not suppressed.

When a child who struggles with anger does not learn to cope with their anger properly, it can cause problems physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and academically. “Experiencing angry feelings over time has been identified as a risk factor for the development of disease and associated with negative health outcomes for both children and adults. Among the diseases include: hypertension, cardiovascular disease, asthma, headaches, and negative social behaviors like bullying and aggressiveness” (Rice, 2006). Poor social skills, academic difficulty, chronic pain, obesity, substance abuse, depression and suicide have also been linked to young students who struggle with anger. Although many of those issues do not appear until adulthood, it is important for a child to recognize and learn to cope with their anger properly before it is too late.

The first step in learning how to cope with anger is to recognize what triggers the anger. Triggers of anger in children can be caused by many different things. Triggers can be caused by different situations, biological reasons, and disorders.

According to Dr. Richard Fitzgibbons from the Institute of Marital Healing, the most common situational triggers of anger in children are:

- Conflicts with parents, such as being angry, controlling or distant
- Parental enabling of narcissism
- Marital conflicts between parents
- Modeling parental anger
- Rejection by siblings or peers
- Selfishness

- Low self-esteem
- Loneliness
- Sadness
- Poor body image
- Difficulty in trusting others
- Early and prolonged time in daycare
- Athletic insecurities
- Excessive time in sports
- Academic difficulties
- Lack of balance

Other possible triggers include excessive viewing of television, playing violent video games, emotional, physical or sexual abuse and traumatic experiences. If a child experiences any of these factors, it does not necessarily mean that they will struggle with their anger; however, those factors may contribute or put the child at a greater risk for anger issues.

There are also biological and behavioral disorders that coincide with anger issues in children. According to the article “The Angry, Defiant Child: Mastery over Anger,” 23 percent of children will meet the criteria for a behavior disorder by the age of 16 (Enright, 2009). A diagnosis of a behavior disorder does not necessarily mean that a child will have anger issues, but they do put the child at a greater risk. The most common disorders include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder.

“Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, is a common behavior disorder that affects roughly 8 percent of school-aged children” (Richard, 2013). Children with ADHD are impulsive, hyperactive and are unable to focus. This often impairs a child’s ability to function

socially and academically, which can lead the child feeling frustrated and angry. Although medication is often prescribed to help manage the symptoms, teaching a child who struggles with ADHD different techniques to manage their anger issues and impulsivity through anger management would be very beneficial to them.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder are very similar. “Oppositional Defiant Disorder is the most common behavioral disorder, effecting 11.3 percent of students” (Enright, 2009). This disorder is characterized by stubbornness, outbursts of temper, acts of defiance and rule breaking. Oppositional Defiant Disorder is a precursor to Conduct Disorder. Conduct Disorder is quite similar, but includes more severe hostility and aggression. If children with these disorders do not learn to control their behavior, they are at greater risk for dropping out of school and getting in trouble with authorities, including the police. Other mood disorders, Bipolar Disorder and learning disabilities such as dyslexia can also coincide with anger issues in children. Anger management can be very beneficial for the children struggling with these disorders, however, they may also need other interventions, such as individual counseling that helps them learn about and cope with their specific disorders.

Once the facilitator of the anger management group and teachers understand what it means to be angry, the many negative effects of anger, and the causes of anger in children, it is imperative that they understand how children respond to anger and the cycle of anger. According to the article “Anger: What do you do with it?” (Rosenthal, 1994) children handle their anger in one of three ways: processing, suppressing or venting.

Processing is the healthy way to deal with anger. Children who process their anger communicate their feelings, what triggered their emotions, the role they had in the situation,

what they could have done differently and what they would have liked the other people in the situation to do differently.

Suppressing is an unhealthy response to anger. Children that hold in, or suppress their anger often struggle with depression. They also have a more difficult time developing meaningful and loving relationships (Rosenthal, 1994).

The most unhealthy and potentially dangerous way a child handles their anger is by venting. When a child vents, they express their anger by throwing tantrums, exaggerating the situation, pouting, yelling, blaming others, attacking and even throw objects. Venting is such a common way for children to deal with their anger that there is now a designated Cycle of Violence and Aggression that explains the venting process.

According to the book “Social Work in Schools” (Openshaw, 2008), the expression of anger has more than one stage:

1. The child is calm, goal oriented and following the rules.
2. The trigger, or antecedent, which is either a denial of something the child needs or a negative infliction on the child, causes a problem.
3. The child becomes agitated, unfocused and begins to withdraw from surrounding group.
4. This is the acceleration stage when the child tries to engage and provoke others, particularly the individual who upset him or her. The child is noncompliant, verbally abusive, whining and intimidating during this time.
5. This is the peak stage during which the child is out of control and displays physical assault, self-abuse, screaming, running and violence.

6. This is the de-escalation stage when the child withdraws, becomes confused, sleeps, blames others and avoids discussing the problems unless there is a possibility of blaming someone else.
7. The final stage is the recovery stage. During this stage, the child will show independence and eagerness for work, but will avoid the problem or debriefing. The child also may be subdued or defensive.

It is important to be familiar with the cycle of anger so that teachers and anger management group facilitators can strategize to try to avoid confrontations. By recognizing and being aware of the different stages of anger, school employees may be able to disrupt the cycle before the situation gets out of control. “Awareness by the teacher or school social worker of individual student patterns and uses of aggression can help break the cycle. The student can be taught how to deal with his or her feelings in a more productive way” (Openshaw, 2008).

Children can learn more productive ways of handling their anger through anger management.

Anger management groups are generally facilitated by a school counselor, psychologist or social worker. Interest in beginning an anger management group usually begins after several complaints from teachers about students with disruptive behavior or bad tempers. It is now the responsibility of the school counselor, psychologist or social worker to perform a Functional Analysis Interview with the student to see if that student needs anger management. “A Functional Analysis Form can be used to gain insights into a student’s abilities and triggers. The form focuses on student strengths, negative triggers and problem-solving abilities. The functional assessment asks the following questions:

1. When, where, and with whom does the behavior occur?
2. What is the targeted behavior?

3. What is the reinforcement after the behavior occurs?
4. What is the purpose of the behavior?
5. What new skills or behaviors need to be learned?
6. What reinforcement will be given for new skills or behavior?

The answers to the questions assist in analyzing the purpose of the anger-related behavior” (Openshaw, 2008).

After analyzing the results of the Functional Analysis Interview, the school counselor, psychologist or social worker will then make a decision as to whether or not the student would benefit from anger management. Every student is unique. It is important that the Functional Analysis Interview reveals the root cause of the behavior so the school counselor, social worker, or psychologist can evaluate the child’s readiness to participate in a group setting. For example, a child who has been through a traumatic experience may not be ready or comfortable in a group setting. They also may not need anger management. Instead of anger management they may need to have individual sessions with a counselor where they can grieve or express their feelings about their experience. If the child is not ready for anger management, they may need other interventions, such as individual therapy.

If the school counselor, psychologist or social worker believes the student will benefit from anger management, they can begin the five steps for creating an anger management group:

1. Identify students who are close in age, will work well together and will benefit from anger management. Not all of the students in the group have to have anger issues. One or two of the students could participate in the group as examples of good behavior, which the other students may learn from.

2. Ask the parents of the students for consent to have their children participate in anger management. It is not only important for the parents to know that their children will be taken out of class for anger management, but they may also be able to help evaluate the progress of the student to see if the anger management is making a difference.
3. Once consent from parents has been given, find a time once a week during the school day for the group to meet for 45 minutes. This can be challenging as the students may have different schedules and classes. It is important to make sure each student is not missing anything critical in school during that time. Based on the curriculum and progress of the students, it is the facilitator's decision as to how many weeks the anger management group should meet.
4. Find an anger management curriculum that is age appropriate for the students. The curriculum should include lessons that are fun and hands-on to engage the students. The curriculum should also include anger management surveys that the students should fill out every few weeks so the facilitator can make notes on the progress the students are making.
5. Create incentives for the students to participate in lessons. This is completely dependent on what the facilitator of the group feels most comfortable with. An incentive could be picking a prize from a box or giving the students 10 minutes at the end of the lesson to do puzzles, play games or build things with Legos.

The purpose of the anger management group is to teach the students how to properly handle their anger in a peer setting. According to the article "The Effects of Anger Management Groups in a Day School for Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents," group anger management has three objectives:

1. Teach the students the cognitive and behavioral components of anger. The students will learn that anger is a normal emotion.
2. Students will be taught cognitive and behavioral techniques to manage anger.
3. Students will practice using these newly acquired techniques, such as relaxation, assertiveness, anticipation, self-instruction, self evaluation, role-play and problem solving

(Kellner, Bry, 1999).

Although the facilitator of the group will teach these objectives during the anger management sessions, one of the benefits to having a group session of peers is that the students will learn from each other, too, which can be beneficial to their progress. “Students are often more comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns with peers rather than adults. Peer mediation is valuable because students can share feelings with other students who will respect and listen. It also teaches students to find solutions rather than just exploding with anger” (Openshaw, 2008).

The typical anger management session begins when the facilitator asks the students an icebreaker question. An icebreaker question is an open-ended question that engages each student. Questions should have some relation to the topic of that day’s lesson. For example, if the lesson for the day was about learning how to work as a team, an icebreaker question to begin that lesson could be, “What is your favorite sports team?” After each student answers the question, the facilitator could then ask other questions, such as, “What do you think that team needs to do to win? Do you think they need to work together?” These questions are an easy transition to the lesson of learning how to work in a team. An example of an activity for that lesson could be to have the students build the tallest tower possible out of blocks. This activity would be active; it

would engage the students and it would challenge them to work as a team. If one of the students gets angry in the process, the construction of the tower could stop and the students could perform whatever technique necessary to calm down and regroup. Once the students are calm, they can attempt the task again. After the activity, there is a time for reflection on the lesson, and how the lesson related to the activity.

There are several techniques that children are taught during anger management to help them calm down when they get angry:

- Take a deep breath
- Stop what they are doing and count to 10
- Squeeze an angry ball
- Go for a walk
- Take a break to listen, contemplate and respond to the situation.

These are not all the techniques taught in anger management, but they are the most common.

In addition to using the anger management techniques listed above, students are also encouraged to use a log to record any anger-provoking situations and to assess the degree to which anger was successfully managed every day (Kellner, 1999). An example of a daily behavior log that is used in elementary schools can be seen below.

<b>Check In – Check Out</b>						
<b>Subject</b>	Math	Science	Writing/Reading	Recess	Social Studies	Special
<b>Score</b>	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
<b>Date:</b> _____					Total Score: _____	
<b>Teacher Notes:</b> _____					Goal met?	
<b>Parent Signature:</b> _____					Y      N	

Check In – Check Out is a system that encourages the child to be responsible and have good behavior throughout the entire school day. The process begins as soon as the child arrives at school. The child meets with the school counselor to pick up their Check In – Check Out sheet. Throughout the day the student is then responsible to have each of their teachers rate their behavior at the end of each lesson. A circled zero means that the student had poor behavior. A one that is circled means the student struggled, but their behavior was moderate. A circled two means that the student did exactly what they were supposed to do during the lessons. If the student has a score of at least 80 percent of the points possible for the day, the student is able to pick a small prize at the end of the day. If the student brings the Check In – Check Out sheet to the school counselor the next day with their parent’s signature at the bottom of the sheet, the student is then able to get another small prize in the morning.

Not only does this system encourage the student to be responsible, but it keeps the teachers involved, informs the student’s parents of their behavior throughout the day and is also a helpful way for the counselor to view the student’s progress.

Now that the process of anger management in schools has been discussed, it is important for the facilitator of the group to learn the four C qualities that could assist them with engaging their students. These qualities include caring, consistency, control and connecting. Students who struggle with anger are often very insecure, especially at school. It is important for the students to know that someone cares for them while they are in their academic environment. The facilitator should always have the student’s best interests in mind and work to help them find the resources they need to alleviate their anger issues. A student is more likely to respect, trust and listen to someone who cares for them.

Students with behavioral problems need a routine – consistency – in order to help them focus in an academic environment. Consistency in the expectations of students and the rules of the group is very important, ensuring the students know what behavior is appropriate and not appropriate. If the facilitator does not have a consistent plan for how to deal with behavioral issues or expectations, students may take advantage of them or not take them seriously. Without consistency, students may become confused, upset or feel like they have been treated unfairly.

Control is another important quality to have as a facilitator of an anger management group. Having control of the students and lesson is extremely important. If the facilitator loses control while a child is having an anger episode or loses control during a lesson, situations can escalate quickly. Not only would it be a distraction from the lesson, but it could be dangerous for the other students, too. It is important for group facilitators to always maintain control.

The final C of the four C qualities that are important for anger management facilitators is the ability to connect with students in the school. It is important not only for the facilitator to be able to connect with students, but for them to be able to keep their students connected and involved in school activities, as well. Having students participate in schools assemblies or having them spend time reading to younger kids in the school can give the students a sense of responsibility and belonging. “As the level of school connectedness increases, both behavior control and social confidence increases. Anger, stress, and outwardly expressed anger decreases when the level of school connectedness increases” (Rice, 2009). The more a student is involved in their school, the less likely they are to have behavioral issues. It is important for schools to provide a wide variety of social opportunities, including clubs, events, support groups, etc., to encourage student connections at school.

Now lets go back to little 8-year-old Johnny in the first grade. If his school were to provide an anger management group that he could participate in, he would learn that his anger is a normal emotion. He would learn what triggers his anger and about different techniques to handle his anger in a healthy way. Johnny would then be able to stay in class and receive a proper education. If he learns to manage his anger, he will likely be healthier physically, mentally, emotionally and academically. “It is critical that students are provided with opportunities to learn about anger, both when expressed and repressed. Skills such as understanding and labeling emotions, expressing emotions effectively, and social competence are important in the appropriate management of anger, and allow students to make the transition through adolescence into adulthood, minimizing the risk of harm from risk taking behaviors, bullying, and drug use” (“Seeing Red”).

In order to help children struggling with anger issues, anger management programs should be implemented in every elementary school. By helping a child cope with their anger issues, it is more likely that child will succeed in life

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