

Anger Management

Module 8

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Tomeko transferred into her elementary school in January, and her teacher, Mr. Garcia, immediately became concerned with Tomeko's "short fuse." Weeks later, in the teacher's lounge, Mr. Garcia asked other teachers if they were seeing the same behaviors.

"The smallest thing seems to set her off. And once that happens, I have trouble reaching her or getting her back on track. I thought at first she might just be nervous about being in a new school, but the behavior is not any better, and it's been almost two months. I can't find anything in her records to help me. Has anyone else noticed this?"

First, her reading teacher spoke: "It's as if she is a little angry all the time, like you say. The other day, for example, a little kindergartener accidentally bumped into her in the corridor and Tomeko let the poor little kid have it, swearing and accusing the kid of bumping into her on purpose! I don't think she'd ever even seen the child before, so it couldn't be that personal."

Her art teacher responded, "Tell me about it. I walk on eggshells around her. With all the art pieces in our classroom, I am afraid she will knock something over if she gets upset. To tell you the truth, I am so frustrated that I find myself just ignoring her in class. I'm sure that's not a good solution, but I have no idea what else to try."

Just then the school psychologist joined the conversation. "You know, we really should see if Tomeko would respond to anger management training. It works for a lot of kids and I'm betting that no one has ever taught her how to 'lower her emotional thermostat.' I could start some one-to-one sessions with her and teach you all how to reinforce the steps with her. Is anybody game to try it?"

Three months later, Mr. Garcia stopped the school psychologist in the hall. "You are never going to believe this," he exclaimed. I just spotted Tomeko teaching another student the steps for using an anger thermometer! She had even

drawn the kid a picture to help him. Don't get me wrong. Tomeko is not exactly what you'd call 'laid back,' but she sure has a better grip on her temper. I never would have guessed this would work. Imagine how much better off she'd be academically if someone had helped her with her temper when she was young. "

Description of Anger Management

Anger management is the term we use to describe various cognitive behavioral interventions (CBI) used in schools, clinics, and in counseling offices to help students to recognize and control their expressions of anger. In the vignette above, for example, anger management consisted of one-to-one sessions with the school psychologist, who used the “anger thermometer” to help the student visualize and recognize signs that she was getting angry.

Research Supporting Anger Management Strategies

Research shows that self-reflection using a CBI recording and problem-solving approach, is a good way to teach students how to anticipate and manage situations that trigger their aggressive behavior (Smith, 2002; Robinson, Smith, & Miller, 2002). As Harris and Pressley (1991) describe,

Cognitive strategies incorporate a ‘how-to-think’ framework for students to use when modifying behavior rather than any explicit ‘what-to-think’ instruction from a teacher. Most important is that CBIs are student-operated systems, thus allowing students to generalize their newly learned behavior much more than teacher-operated systems that rely on external reward and punishment procedures. (as cited in Smith, 2002)

Lochman, Nelson, and Sims (1981) designed and tested the Anger Coping Program, which teaches students to use thinking processes to change aggressive responses into appropriate alternatives by (a) modifying their thinking processes regarding the circumstances surrounding certain situations and (b) considering alternative responses. Lochman and his colleagues reported that one of the changes in youth participants was the shift in locus of control. In other words, youth began to realize that *they* could be in control of their anger (Lochman & Wells, 2002).

Using research that links supportive adult relationships with academic success, Arter (2007) discussed the Positive Alternative Learning Supports (PALS) Program. Many students who struggle with anger management have a history of negative interactions with adults in the school setting. The PALS program was developed specifically to support students who required more intensive than basic interventions (Arter, 2007). Aiming to increase students’ positive adult interactions, the PALS program matches teachers who volunteer to be mentors with students in the program. After a collaborative group completes a comprehensive functional behavior assessment (FBA) to identify the function of behavior, the designated “teacher mentor” serves as the adult who is on their side. The teacher mentor has, (a) an understanding of the function of the

student's negative behaviors, (b) knowledge of the behavior intervention plan, and (c) training on positive reinforcement strategies. Students who were in the PALS program showed a significant increase in their GPA, attendance, supportive adult relationships, and positive classroom behaviors.

Marcus and Mattiko (2007) looked at the effectiveness of anger management training through recreational therapy for students with attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The authors discussed the dangers of pharmacological intervention absent any cognitive behavior interventions. They then emphasized the importance of consistently teaching students steps to effectively and safely express their anger. This study was based on research by Hinshaw (1987) who identified two risk factors specific to ADHD that creates dysfunction as they enter adulthood: "aggression and impaired social relations" (cited in Marcus & Mattiko, 2007, p. 17). Analysis of the evaluative data revealed that after 13 weeks, parents noticed a difference in how their children expressed anger; however, the 38 participating children, ages 6-12, did not.

When to Consider Introducing Anger Management

- When the student is unaware of his feelings or the circumstances that trigger his anger.
- When a student loses his temper for no apparent cause.
- When a student overreacts to a situation with anger.

Guidelines for Implementation/Task Analysis of the Steps

Anger management can follow several formats. Here are a few examples that typify how it is implemented.

- a) Teach the student how to recognize and put into words feelings and triggers that lead to angry outbursts (e.g., being called a name, arguing with classmate). The anger thermometer is one visual tool for helping students with this process. This intervention uses a scale (feeling thermometer, anger thermometer) where zero is having no anger and 100 is the most anger (McKain, 1999). In this approach, students learn words to describe their anger at different levels. For example, a student might describe his highest "temperature" as "boiling mad" and describe related behavioral indicators such as a clenched fist, feeling flushed, getting loud, or swearing. On the other hand, the same student might choose and record on his anger thermometer such descriptors as "just chillin," relaxed, or daydreaming to describe himself when not at all angry.
- b) Using a "Trouble Record" is one way to assist students in understanding the triggers for their anger (Robinson, 2007). In this example, the student receives a checklist that includes information about an incident, such as time, location, triggers, others involved, actions, and possible alternatives.
- c) Similar to the "Trouble Record," Young, West, Smith, and Morgan (1991) developed an excellent student handbook for teaching the ABCs of behavior. Through an antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) analysis, students learn to discriminate between events that trigger appropriate and inappropriate responses; then, students learn to "self-talk" about

their choices in behavior (e.g., “If I do _____, then _____ will happen. But if I do _____, things will turn out better for me.”).

After introducing the feeling thermometer, checklist, or A-B-C chart, the teacher or other adult helps the student think about and write down how he feels physically and emotionally (“self-reflection”) in particular situations. Cognitive Behavioral Intervention (CBI) recordings help students learn to anticipate the situations that trigger their anger.

The adult teaches the student some cognitive behavioral interventions to calm himself. These can also include: counting to ten, doing deep breathing exercises, or visualizing what might happen if he manages his temper and has a good outcome. The student is encouraged to practice the CBI techniques at school and at home.

Finally, “Self-talk” describes a very important component of CBIs. The student thinks aloud about his or her intensifying feelings and the options for lowering the emotional “thermostat.” For example, “I hate this stupid class. I am getting p---ed off just walking toward the door. I know I am about to lose it with this substitute. She was terrible yesterday! But I have to think about my eligibility for the soccer team. Okay, count to 10 and take it easy. This class is the key to getting on that team. S-o-c-c-e-r, s-o-c-c-e-r, CALM down.”

When Anger Management May Not Work

Anger management must be developmentally appropriate. Anger management requires abstract thinking and talking about one’s feelings, triggers, and behaviors, which is not something that all children, especially young children or those with significant developmental or cognitive impairments, can manage.

Anger management techniques are not a substitute for crisis interventions when an individual is violent or unable to control his or her anger. However, they may help de-escalate a situation with a student who is already familiar with the techniques.

In sum, anger management interventions may appear easy to implement. However, they are more effective when a trained person has made a precise assessment of the functions and cause of the student’s anger and/or aggression. As Keller and Tapasak (2004) explained, individuals express anger for various reasons, not all of which are the result of their inability to manage their anger. (For a detailed discussion of pathways of aggressive behavior and appropriate interventions for each one, see Kerr and Nelson, 2010.)

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http://www.starcenter.pitt.edu/Newsletter/Yr1999/SLINK_SEP99.pdf

School-based Behavioral Health Website of the University of Pittsburgh offers resources to support children and teens who have emotional and behavioral challenges.
<http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidenced-based Programs and Practice (search for anger management interventions)
<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/Search.aspx>
