

Anger Management in the Classroom

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Table of contents

Summary	3
Keywords	4
Introduction.....	5
Learning to control anger.....	6
What motivates students to act out in an angry or aggressive manner?.....	6
Assessing anger.....	8
Interventions	8
Cognitive Behavioural Approach.....	9
Reducing the Physiological Response	9
Teaching skills Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution	10
Conflict Resolution	11
Relaxation Training.....	12
Using Mindfulness.....	13
Discussion and conclusion.....	13
Further Information.....	15
Biography	16
Acknowledgements.....	17
References.....	18

Summary

This article seeks to explore the reasons and motivations behind inappropriate expressions of anger, and how these can be successfully addressed. The article begins by looking at anger as a developmental and skills deficit perspective and recognises that not all anger is the same, but there are different forms and motivations behind anger. Each type of anger needs to be addressed differently, and the article explores a number of approaches that include cognitive behavioural techniques, conflict resolution strategies, and mindfulness and relaxation training. It may be concluded that each of these approaches is effective, but that their efficacy depends on context, type, and function of the anger, and it is vital to include the student in this process if any strategy is to be successful.

Keywords

Anger Management; Mindfulness; Anger; Relaxation; Cognitive Behaviourism.

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing educators today is how to cope with students who appear not to be able to control their anger impulses. Although small in number, this group of students can be very disruptive to everyone in school, both staff and students alike. One of the roles of the Guidance Counsellor is to help students understand and explore their feelings. When a student has anger management difficulties a referral is usually made to the Guidance Counsellor. It is then up to the Guidance Counsellor to develop a trusting relationship and create a psychologically safe place to explore and manage these feelings.

This article looks not only at the causes and motivations behind inappropriate expressions of anger in the classroom, but also offers practical solutions to tackling this unwanted behaviour, using the latest research. These techniques are aimed at controlling the students' behaviour in the classroom, but also engage the students themselves, empowering them to control their own anger.

This article begins by looking at anger from a developmental perspective, and how control of anger usually improves as the young person matures, but there are exceptions due to deficits in coping or social skills. It then outlines some of the underlying motivations for the inappropriate expression of anger, and shows that there are different forms of anger, including reactive and instrumental anger. Both have different causes and serve different functions, and as such need to be addressed in a different fashion. The article will examine some techniques for assessing aggressive behaviour, before moving on to discuss successful interventions, including a cognitive behavioural approach, conflict resolution, and relaxation training, to deal with the physical response often associated with angry behaviour.

Learning to control anger

Learning to control anger is a developmental skill. The frontal cortex, that part of the brain which controls the ability to inhibit impulses, can take twenty three years to develop fully. From a developmental perspective younger children display little ability to control their anger and aggression. The typical two year old will express their anger freely and openly – “*I want it and I want it now, and if I can't have it I will fight for it*”. Gradually, by the time they reach school age most children can control their impulses. By the end of primary school children can delay their angry impulses, for example, waiting until after school to pick a fight outside the school gate.

As we move into adolescence we need to remember the pressures and the behavioural imperatives of this transitional stage. At post-primary level adolescents tend to channel their anger into games or competition, where they either diffuse this energy playing sport, or by watching others compete. Peer pressure, the need to conform, and the search for identity, may result in risk-taking and challenging behaviours, and any fighting in this age group is usually gang related. However, there are exceptions where you will see a twelve year old behaving like the two year old – acting out and having a temper tantrum. This is someone who is unable to control this impulse, what is referred to as a reactive anger. Another type of anger is instrumental anger. This anger is much more deliberate, goal centred, and the person appears to be in control.

Young people who display instrumental anger are goal orientated, and their anger helps them obtain that goal (Dodge, 1991). Reactive anger is more immediate – it is a reaction to an anger provoking threat where the young person feels afraid or threatened. These young people have difficulty in problem solving, are easily physically aroused into conflict, and generally more hyperactive and impulsive (Asarnow & Cullen, 1985). The management of anger can be a problem both when the young person acts out, but also when they become so angry that they withdraw. Depression is often anger which has been internalised. These young people experience feelings of inferiority, self-consciousness, shyness, hypersensitivity, reclusiveness, timidity, and can present with passive aggressive behaviour. They can also lack social skills which lead to alienation anxiety and withdrawal (Findler & Engel, 2011).

Anger can be experienced as a positive emotion, and it can make us become more assertive and stand up for ourselves. It can also help us express tension, and it can energise us and help us feel in control (Novaco, 1975). It can have negative effects when it leads to aggression, when it is too intense, when it disrupts relationships, or when it dictates the way we feel all the time. The difficulty with an anger intervention is that the goal is not to get rid of anger but to make sure that the response is appropriate.

What motivates students to act out in an angry or aggressive manner?

It is often the way in which anger is expressed, rather than the anger itself that becomes a problem for many students. There are many different influences on young people that can shape how anger is expressed – for example, it can be learned in the family home; it can be observed in the local environment, school or community; and media, including social media,

can also model or reinforce anger. Weak family and social ties can also lead to inappropriate expressions of anger, as can observation of aggressive acts where others are rewarded for anger. Deficits in moral reasoning, problem solving, or in proactive skills can lead to angry or aggressive behaviour.

Recent research on connectedness in schools indicates that this can be a protective factor, reducing anger and increasing behaviour control in school aged children (Rice, Kang, Weaver & Howell, 2008). Connectedness refers to a student's perception regarding the nature of the key relationships in their daily lives (e.g., - parent, peer, teacher/school, and community). Building relationships and connections in schools can help to reduce anger and aggression in school aged children. Helping students and families to build up these social networks helps students by increasing support in times of difficulty.

Table 1: Motivations for the expression of anger as aggression.

Reactive Anger	Instrumental Anger
Fear – they will lose something or be denied something	Intimidation – bully another into giving in
Frustration – not able to communicate wants or needs	Manipulation – using anger as a way to emotionally control other people

A student's body language may be useful in identifying why he/she is acting in an angry or aggressive manner. He/she may look fearful, frustrated or threatening. The students who have never developed the skills to control their impulses, and are emotionally stuck in the terrible twos, usually act aggressively out of fear or frustration (reactive anger). With these students, teaching a programme (Faupel et al, 1998) to help them learn to control his/her temper, and redirecting them to a safe area in the build-up to the temper is a successful option. These young people can have a predictable pattern when expressing anger, and teachers can learn to recognise the early warning signs. Simply pointing these signs out to the student in a friendly way can help. This all depends on the relationship the teacher has with the student. Some schools have a prearranged strategy of letting students experiencing reactive anger out of class to go to the guidance counsellor.

Viewing aggressive behaviour in a developmental context gives it different meaning and warrants a different type of response from the teacher. Teachers may respond with a teaching solution to a learning error, but a moralistic response to a behavioural error. In fact, behavioural mistakes can be thought of as an inevitable part of learning how to behave. What we need to do is place the emphasis on teaching students new skills, and guiding their behaviour in a positive direction.

Students who use anger as a tool for intimidation present as very much in control, calm, yet frightening. They make their threats or demands in a controlled manner. With these students the best thing to do is not to fight but not to give in. State the consequences of the behaviour if they follow out their threat and quote the school policy in this area. Sometimes instead of getting locked into a power battle giving a face saving way out can help diffuse the situation.

Students who try to use anger to manipulate present as calm, yet they have an inconsistent pattern of demands. The topic of conversation changes and the student may describe other incidents where he/she felt hard done by and begin an entirely different conversation than the one you were having. There is a clear underlying thread in this exchange: you give me what I want and I won't lose control. In this situation the broken record technique works well – simply stick to the original topic and state consequences of behaviour. It can also help to arrange a meeting at a later date to get all the concerned parties together so that all the facts are clear. When there is good communication it is difficult to manipulate a person or situation.

Both reactive and instrumental anger differ in timing, intensity, and frequency of occurrence. One thing they have in common is the need for assessment and intervention. We also know that many of these young people can have an underlying skills deficit – they can focus on negative aspects, or threats in the environment, problems in cognitive processing, behaviour, self-control, and ability to cope in social situations (Lochman, Lampron & Rabiner, 1989).

Assessing anger

Schools in addressing incidents of challenging behaviour should assess and record these in an objective and systematic way. This may be done using some assessment instruments or self-monitoring or simply recording behaviour as it occurs.

There are a number of different scales for self- assessment, or self- monitoring of anger (Findler & Engel, 2011). In schools young people come to the attention of staff because of their inappropriate behaviour. Typically they have been acting out – involved in some row, aggressive incident, or other unacceptable behaviour. The initial contact with these young people should be about building a relationship of trust.

Once the young person is agreeable to working on the anger issues, a very easy self-monitoring tool is the Hassle Log (Feindler & Engel, 2011). This is a very commonly used tool. The young person records situations and rates his/her anger on a scale. The Hassle log is used to help individuals identify sequences of 'trigger' or 'setting' events, their responses, and to develop awareness by getting them to engage in self -evaluation. It has been used to teach self-observation skills and self -examination skills. The Hassle log has also been used to help individual students develop scripts for role play, as a means of developing alternative behaviour strategies in response to trigger events.

It is important when taking the student's case history, or using the Hassle log as a baseline measure that one identifies if this young person's anger is reactive anger or instrumental. The nature of any intervention is then based on this assessment. If it is a reactive anger then the focus is on teaching specific skills, as the anger is viewed as a skills deficit. If the person is displaying instrumental anger the goal of the intervention is to change the reinforcement – so they do not get what they want when they act aggressively.

Interventions

Most interventions are based on cognitive behavioural techniques. The idea is the stimulus triggers a physiological response and a distorted cognitive response, or anger provoking

thoughts. This results in the person feeling angry. The typically cognitive approach focuses on three things –

- i) physical or physiological response;
- ii) the thinking or cognitive response; and
- iii) the behaviour (Feindler & Engel, 2011).

A meta-analysis of all the research studies (Sukhodolsky, Kassinove, & Gorman, 2004) supports a cognitive behavioural model for older adolescents (15 years to 17 year olds), probably due to developmental issues such as their capacity for abstract thinking.

Cognitive Behavioural Approach

In the view of the author the most effective approach to anger management is a cognitive behavioural approach. The cognitive behaviour theorists believe that faulty thoughts and beliefs underlie anger problems. This is a two pronged approach –

- i) decreasing the physiological arousal using relaxation procedure; and,
- ii) cognitive thought restructuring or simply changing how you think.

Raymond Novaco (1975) developed a programme for helping adults to deal with anger and this has been modified for use with teenagers and children (Faupel et al., 1998). An expanded exploration of this approach is outlined in the sections below.

Reducing the Physiological Response

Relaxation training is an essential part of an anger management programme which can be employed by the guidance counsellor in collaboration with school management and staff. Anger is an emotional reaction to a set of circumstances or triggers. The trigger or stressful event is known as provocation. A firework has been used as a model to explain the way anger works (Faupel et al., 1998). The trigger is the match that lights the firework and sets off the anger response. The body of the firework is our reaction internally and externally to the event outside us, and the fuse is the mind or our thoughts about the event (Novaco, 1975).

There are external factors and internal factors which contribute to the explosion. The external factors we may or may not have control over e.g. stress in the classroom – too hot, too many people, someone pushing into you. The internal factors we have control over, and these include our thoughts and physical reactions to a situation. Our internal response stems from our beliefs and expectations about certain situations, which can trigger an internal dialogue and shape how we view a situation.

In working with a student who has difficulties with anger management the school and guidance counsellor can make a start with teaching the student relaxation. The guidance counsellor can then work with the student to help him/her understand that there are external events that he/she may have no control over, but that he/she *can* control how he/she thinks about the events or how he/she physically reacts to a situation.

The next stage the guidance counsellor and school can take is to help the student track his/her thoughts and anger, to become aware of his/her triggers. The mind and body are interconnected. Changing how we think can change how we feel. Changing how we interpret events by re-scripting our internal dialogue is called cognitive or thought restructuring. In anger management training this means identifying “hot thoughts” and replacing them with “cold thoughts”. Hot thoughts make us angrier, and cold thoughts are thoughts which calm us down. The guidance counsellor can work with the student to help him/her to develop a range of cold thoughts, which can be written on cue cards, as can a range of alternate behaviours, or calming strategies. To increase awareness the guidance counsellor may also use role play on a one to one basis, and rehearse common situations which provoke anger.

A worksheet with the visual representation of a firework can also be a useful resource which can be used to increase awareness. The student is asked to fill in the triggers (the match), to observe what physically happens (body of firework), and identify the hot thoughts which help the match ignite the fuse. With older students it can be useful if a behaviour diary of situations is kept. The following headings may be used:

- i) triggers – who, where, when;
- ii) what happened in your body and your head or what were your hot thoughts in the situation; and,
- iii) what was the outcome.

Alternatively the Hassle log is a useful resource for documenting setting events and triggers.

Teaching skills Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution

If anger is looked at as a way to communicate, then the goal of the intervention is to teach a more appropriate way to communicate. Guidance counsellors can work with students in relation to developing problem solving and conflict resolution skills which can be used as alternatives to aggressive behaviour. In any problem situation it is wise to begin with the use of reflective listening rather than assigning blame. Ask open-ended questions such as who, where, why, when? Closed questions should be avoided as they close down communication, for example, “*do you think I can wait here all day?*”, “*Do you think I am stupid?*” Nelsen et al., (2001) recommend that we “stop telling and start asking”.

Asking open questions and employing reflective listening skills show the student that you are listening and may help them clarify what he/she wants and how it can be achieved. Knowing when to keep quiet and listen is an important skill – do not rush to give a solution but allow the students to arrive at their own solutions. Often students tell us things at times when we are preoccupied or at times when we cannot give them the hearing they need. Feel free to arrange an alternative, more appropriate time when you can listen to them later. Simply say that what they are telling you is too important to rush, and can you schedule a time to meet them and discuss it fully. Be sure to follow up on this. If they have come to you with a problem go back later and check that it has been sorted out or simply ask them how it is going.

In order to problem-solve, students need certain skills. First, they have to be able to recognise that a problem exists. They may have poor reasoning skills, weak logical or sequential thinking skills, or they may have poor memory. A deficit in any of these areas will make it difficult to implement problem-solving strategies. These deficits must be remedied or a way to bypass them identified before proceeding. Young people who have these basic skills can solve problems but we must have faith in them and their ability to work through and find solutions (Nelson et al., 2001). It is hard sometimes to trust that students can make choices and decisions. This demands that we adopt the Adlerian position of driving behaviour from the back seat. In order to implement some of these ideas we have to trust and let go of some of our control in the process. All parties must agree on the solution before it can become a plan and this is where we are able to give choices within limits set by the teacher or guidance counsellor.

The problem-solving technique outlined below is best carried out on a one to one basis, but can also be done with a small group. It can be used between guidance counsellors, teachers and students, but students can also be taught to use the technique themselves.

- i) Identify the problem
- ii) Brainstorm solutions
- iii) Evaluate solutions
- iv) Agree the plan and set a time to re-evaluate it

It is important to keep it positive, with no blaming or criticising, instead encouraging students to participate by taking on board their comments and suggestions. Reinforce the process by praising and rewarding their efforts to resolve the issue.

Conflict Resolution

Emotions play a large role in keeping any conflict going. Many people come to a situation ready to fight it out. The main emotions involved here are fear and anger. Sharing emotions can be as important as sharing perception (Bodine and Crawford, 1998). In order to successfully resolve a conflict, students need to feel heard, understood, and empowered. Usually in conflict situations communications are poor and participants are high in suspicion. Students also need to feel worthwhile and that they are capable. The focus for them has to be letting go of mistakes and looking to the future (Albert, 2003). Students who learn conflict resolution skills develop social competencies of co-operation, empathy, creative problem solving, social cognitive skills, and relationship skills (Bodine and Crawford, 2003). Conflict resolution encompasses negotiation, mediation, peer mediation, and collaborative problem solving.

According to Bodine and Crawford (2003) there are four underlying tenets of conflict resolution:

- i) Conflict is natural;
 - ii) Differences can be acknowledged and appreciated;
 - iii) Conflict when viewed in a positive way can be seen as a solution-building opportunity;
- and,

iv) When conflicting parties come together and build on each other's strengths to find solutions, there is a positive knock on effect where a nurturing climate is created and individual self-worth is valued.

Guidance counsellors can use a skills training approach outside of conflict situations. Anger management and communication skills can be taught, and group work used to develop empathy. There are very few win/win solutions so be prepared to give. Acknowledging the other person's point of view can sometimes be sufficient to shift the behaviour. It is important to stay positive and stay focused on the behaviour, not the student. In this way the student gets a clear message that this is not personal. Separating the deed from the doer can strengthen the guidance counsellor and/or teacher-student relationship.

Relaxation Training

We need to keep in mind that the mismatch, between the student's ability, and the demands of the school situation can be stressful, and may produce aggression and disruptive behaviour in some. Relaxation training can also be used as a de-escalating or prevention technique. It can be adopted as part of an anger management programme or a stress management, or anxiety reduction programme with older students.

Often in a classroom situation students can be asked to adopt relaxing postures as a way to calm and centre them before the lesson. Asking the students to close their eyes and sit with their shoulders relaxed, their hands on the desk with palms facing upwards and their legs outstretched for a few minutes can relax the mood in the class. The guidance counsellor can work with teachers and students in relation to the use of relaxation techniques in a classroom setting.

Older students can be involved by asking them to identify ways in which they relax outside school hours. They can be asked – "*What is your own favourite way of relaxing, and why does it work?*" Sports, taking a bath, or going for a walk, are some common examples but it is always a very individual thing. Stress is part of life and having a healthy way to cope with stress is an important life skill.

We all carry tension in our bodies. A certain amount of tension in our muscles helps us to function, walk, talk, eat etc. When we are under pressure, we hold tension in certain areas of our bodies. Having the student identify where they hold tension in their body can clue them in to signs that they need to relax. With pre and early teens, use a drawing and have them mark the areas of the body where they experience stress with a pencil or marker.

With older teenagers, surveying the body for signs of tension using a list is a helpful exercise.

Music can be used as a tool to build a calm atmosphere, or as background for a relaxation exercise. With adolescents, using an iPod or mobile phone with their choice of calming music can help them to unwind. Yoga and meditation can also be used successfully with older students. Invite students to try different relaxation techniques and to choose their favourites.

Using Mindfulness

One of the more popular techniques for reducing stress and managing physiological responses to situations is mindfulness. Mindfulness involves paying attention in a particular way - on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Mindful awareness techniques help people to improve their wellbeing by training the mind to focus on experience in the present moment (Siegel, 2010). Scientific studies have also validated the powerful effects of mindfulness and established it as a valuable tool for reducing stress, anxiety, and depression and increasing vitality and resilience. It opens us to learning and creativity, improves concentration, and attention, and builds empathy and compassion (Siegel, 2010).

When applied to anger management training it is simply allowing the feeling of anger to come and go. Acknowledge the anger as present but in a non-judgmental way allowing it to be and wash over you but acknowledging that it will pass without taking any action on it.

Students who have difficulty controlling their anger present in different ways. The key to intervention is teaching new skills, putting a strategy in place to deal with the behaviour as it occurs, not reinforcing the inappropriate or aggressive behaviour and reinforcing the student for using appropriate ways to communicate and get what they want. If a student has difficulty in a subject area we focus on what they are struggling with and teach it in a different way. In the same way if a student has a problem controlling their anger we should identify the area of difficulty and teach the student the necessary skills. The interventions discussed - cognitive behaviour therapy, problem solving, conflict resolution and relaxation have wider applications. These are life skills which are relevant for all students and not just those with problems controlling anger. Finding the time to teach these skills can be a challenge but thirty minutes of prevention is better than two hours of fire-fighting. A proactive approach is better than a reactive one.

Discussion and conclusion

We have seen that control of anger is a developmental issue, and a skill which develops as the young person matures. However, there are those who lack the skills and experience to control angry impulses, for a variety of reasons and who require additional support and training to do so.

There are a number of different ways to address angry behaviour including the cognitive behavioural approach, which tackles the issue from both a physiological and cognitive perspective. The strategy here is to make the student aware that they cannot control everything that's happening around them, but they can control how they feel, and what it is that can trigger their anger, and then take appropriate steps to adjust their response to these triggers. The other component in this approach is conflict resolution, where the student addresses negative thought patterns they may be experiencing during times they feel angry. These negative thoughts can stem from misunderstandings, or a lack of coping skills, or social skills, and these skills can be taught, enabling the student to better solve problems and resolve apparent conflicts in their lives. Another way to address anger is through relaxation

and a number of methods were presented, including practical relaxation exercises, aimed at addressing physical tension, and mindfulness, which is designed to make students more aware of what is actually happening in the moment, and accept it rather than try to change it.

Each of these approaches to dealing with anger in the classroom is successful, and their effective application depends very much on the context, type, and function of the anger being expressed, and also on the maturity of the individual concerned. It is imperative though to include the student in this process, giving him/her a sense of ownership of the solution and empowering him/her to change.

Further Information

For more information on the Hassle Log (Feindler & Engel, 2011) assessment tool see the following website: <http://www.texmed.org/hassle/>

Download an example Hassle Log (Feindler & Engel, 2011) in PDF format from the website: <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/anger-management-hassle-log.pdf>

The National Behaviour Support Service list of resources on emotional literacy and anger management:

http://www.nbss.ie/sites/default/files/publications/emotional_lit_resources_proofed_cu.pdf

The American Psychological Association has some interesting articles on anger management Strategies for managing anger: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/controlling-anger.aspx>

How to recognise and deal with anger: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recognize-anger.aspx>

Worksheets for anger management with adolescents:

<http://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheets/anger/adolescents>

Biography

Dr. Moya O'Brien is a Clinical Psychologist. She trained both in Ireland and the USA. She has worked with children and families in a variety of settings and has extensive experience of working with children with disabilities. She is a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst and has completed her doctorate in Clinical Psychology. She has worked for the Mid-Western Health Board, the ERHA and the Midland Health Board. She is currently director of ICEP Europe an online training institute for Teachers and other professionals.

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