



Aggression in Adolescents: Strategies for Educators

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Middle school and high school educators know that it comes with the territory: Sooner or later, a fight will break out between students. Bringing together a large group of cognitively immature and emotionally volatile adolescents against their collected wills into a confined space for seven hours almost mandates the outbreak of trouble. One might wonder how it is that most schools manage as well as they do!

In comparison to physical bullying, relational aggression, and the numerous forms of verbal and nonverbal harassment that permeate many secondary school environments, violent physical aggression is a statistically less frequent, though equally troubling, event. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2007), in the year 2005, 14% of students in grades 9 through 12 reported having been in a physical fight on school property in the last 12 months. Although male students were more likely to have been in a fight, 8.8% of female students reported that they had been in a physical fight on school property in the past year, a slight increase from the previous survey. In addition, approximately 5% of teachers in central city schools and 3% in suburban and rural schools were physically attacked by students.

Regardless of the frequency at any individual school, the disruptive level of violence that accompanies serious physical aggression is so antithetical to the learning environment that even a few incidents demand attention. A fight between students in a classroom, hallway, or lunchroom brings every other activity to a halt and draws fellow students and concerned adults toward the violence, both as onlookers and interveners. The disruption is total, the aftereffects lingering, and the potential for serious injury very real.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AGGRESSIVE YOUTH

For many years, modern researchers have attempted to understand the purpose of human aggression. The more recent work of Kenneth Dodge and his colleagues (e.g., Dodge, 1991) has identified two broad types of childhood and adolescent aggression: proactive and reactive. Students who engage in proactive aggression typically *initiate* aggressive behavior to obtain some goal or outcome. Conversely, students who engage in reactive aggression *react* to perceived threats around them. Both forms can involve serious physical violence, but the function of the violence and the cognitive-emotional precursors are typically quite different. Although there are very few "pure types" and most highly aggressive youth demonstrate elements of both proactive and reactive patterns, educators should recognize the predominant features, as the intervention and disciplinary approaches for each vary sharply.

Proactive Aggression

Students who engage in proactive aggression tend to show little in the way of observable emotion and focus their aggression on acquiring some personal goal. Their experiences have included generally positive outcomes for both their own aggressive behavior and for that of the individuals they observe as behavior models. As examples, some bully behavior and gang turf battles may be seen as proactive aggression. The bully may want to acquire peer approval and victim submission, and the gang members want to acquire status and control.

Reactive Aggression

Reactive aggression is frequently highly emotional and often the result of biased or deficient cognitive processing on the part of the student. Highly reactive aggressive students tend to misperceive bumps, looks, and other interactions as hostile, and then may react angrily and aggressively. In addition to this hostile cognitive bias, these students often have deficient problem-solving abilities and lack the skill to effectively generate alternative, nonaggressive responses during the initial moments of arousal.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

It is helpful for educators who are seeking to reduce the frequency of interpersonal aggression to take a whole-school, three-tiered approach. Because everyone in the building, staff and students alike, contributes to an environment that either increases or decreases the likelihood of student aggression, prevention efforts should address the needs of everyone. The objective is to create an environment that decreases the likelihood of aggressive behavior while increasing the opportunities for learning socially desirable conflict resolution and anger management strategies. The three-tiered approach uses *universal* supports for everyone, *selected* supports for higher-risk students, and *indicated* supports for students with severe and pervasive problems with anger and aggression.

Tier I: Universal Supports—Addressing the Needs of All Students

The largest pupil segment in any secondary school is comprised of students who are behaviorally skilled, nonaggressive, and academically goal-oriented. Because of their numbers, they play a significant role in mediating the level of aggressive behavior in school through their willingness and ability to adhere to school rules and routines. Consequently, the implementation of effective school-wide and classroom rules, rationally conceived and fairly enforced, will help keep this critical group as large and influential as it can be.

Energize the Code of Conduct. Ensure that the discipline policy is firmly rooted in a well-articulated code that (a) specifies the rights and responsibilities of both students and staff members, (b) identifies both desirable and unacceptable behaviors, and (c) is actively taught to all parties. A well-designed, rigorously enforced Code of Conduct is the administrator's strongest tool for growing the base of nonaggressive, behaviorally skilled students.

Reduce overcrowding. Large numbers of students in limited spaces increase the potential for tempers to flare. The use of staggered starting times and bell schedules and the addition of another lunch period can ameliorate these conditions to some degree. In areas and at times of high student density such as hallways, common areas, and lunchrooms, efforts should be made to make the ratio of supervisory staff to students is as low as possible.

Provide a classroom-level conflict resolution curriculum to all students. Two such available curricula that are well suited to middle school and high school students are noted in the Recommended Resources section.

Tier II: Selected Supports—Addressing the Needs of Higher-Risk Students

Every normally distributed adolescent population in a middle school or high school contains a behaviorally at-risk group of between 10% and 20% of the students. Not all of these students are at risk for engaging in aggressive behavior, but those who are demand attention. Aggression is a comparatively stable behavioral trait, and those young people who are still using their fists as an anger management or conflict resolution strategy in middle school or high school are at significant risk for serious problems later. For many of these students, the school environment may be the last best hope.

Communicate with feeder schools ahead of time. Aggressive middle school students become aggressive high school students with impressive consistency. It is better to have preventive supports in place and then reduce or remove them as necessary than to be forced into a reactive position after the first inevitable incident.

Use office disciplinary data to guide interventions. These data can provide administrators with information on frequency of aggressive behaviors, locations of problems, types of aggressive problems, students involved, and staff making referrals. The School-Wide Information System (SWIS; Educational and Community Supports) is a Web-based office referral organization and monitoring system designed to help school personnel use office referral data in the development of student interventions.

Provide skills training to chronic fighters. Students who have the anger-driven, reactive aggressive characteristics described above are unlikely to benefit from exclusionary discipline alone. The threat of police citation, suspension, or expulsion is inadequate. Aversive consequences must be paired with effective anger management training and, when possible, provided by school personnel in the school setting. It is important to remember that managing excessive anger requires a complex set of cognitive and behavioral skills, and when students are lacking or display deficient skills, they must be systematically trained over time. Consequently, skills training is an important component of an effective school-wide discipline plan. Promising programs for addressing these necessary skills are noted in the Recommended Resources section.

Tier III: Indicated Supports—Addressing the Needs of Students With Severe and Pervasive Problems

Students in this category typically make up no more than 3% to 5% of the school population, but they have the

potential to occupy a disproportionate percentage of educators' time spent responding to problems.

Bring behavior intervention plans up to date.

Students who are receiving special education services and who have identified behavioral challenges, including aggression, should have up-to-date behavior intervention plans (BIPs). These plans should be driven by functional behavioral assessments and describe the scope and substance of classroom and school-wide positive behavioral supports. Importantly, the BIP must be effectively communicated to all staff members who routinely interact with the student, and its content should be followed and modified as necessary. Failure to maintain and follow this document deprives the student of entitled support and can leave a school open to legal problems in the event of a serious incident.

Train staff members in emotional de-escalation, safe restraint, and safe transport techniques.

(e.g., see Larson, 2005). When planning for students who have histories of frequent and serious problems with anger and aggression, programs should ensure that primary instructional staff are skilled in crisis response. Procedures for implementing room clears and contacting support personnel should be clearly articulated. Many local law enforcement agencies will train school personnel in safe, effective restraint and transportation procedures. The Crisis Prevention Institute in Brookfield, Wisconsin (CPI, n.d.) specializes in training school staff members to manage students who engage in disruptive or assaultive behaviors.

SUMMARY

It is essential for educators to keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of even the most volatile of students in their schools would rather *not* get into a fight in school. Most fighters know full well that it's a painful endeavor, both physically and in terms of later ramifications. When it happens, it is often because the students did not have the knowledge or skills to prevent it. Consequently, the educator's charge is to help create an environment that actively provides an appropriate, multitiered prevention structure that includes behavioral supports for all students. This means moving substantially beyond exclusionary discipline approaches to a whole school concept that addresses the needs of all.

REFERENCES

Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI). (n.d.). *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*. Brookfield, WI: Author. Available: <http://www.crisisprevention.com>

Dodge, K. A. (1991). The structure and function of reactive and proactive aggression. In D. J. Pepler & K. H. Rubin (Eds.), *Development and treatment of childhood aggression*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Educational and Community Supports (University of Oregon). *School-Wide Information System (SWIS)*. Eugene, OR: Author. Available: <http://www.swis.org>
National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (2007). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2007*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/index.asp>

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Universal Support: Classroom Curricula

Slaby, R., Wilson-Brewer, R., & Dash, K. (1994). *Aggressors, victims, and bystanders: Thinking and acting to prevent violence* (grades 6–8). Sewickley, PA: Education Development Center (Teenage Health Teaching Modules). Available: <http://www.thtm.org>
Prothrow-Stith, D. (1987). *Violence prevention curriculum for adolescents* (Grades 9–10). Sewickley, PA: Education Development Center (Teenage Health Teaching Modules). Available: <http://www.thtm.org>

Selected Support: Anger Management Training

Goldstein, A., Glick, B., & Gibbs, J. C. (1998). *Aggression replacement training*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
Larson, J. (2005). *Think First: Addressing aggressive behavior in secondary schools*. New York: Guilford Press.
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2002). *Anger management for substance abuse and mental health clients*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://www.kap.samhsa.gov/products/manuals/pdfs/anger2.pdf>

Although aimed at adults, these downloadable manuals and workbooks may be easily adapted to adolescents. See also in Spanish, *Programa para el manejo del enojo en clientes con problemas de abuso de sustancias y trastornos de salud mental*, 2006.

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