Anger and violence in elementary schools: Conflict resolution as a method of prevention

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Abstract
One of the most significant problems facing our country is violent crime. In the last few years, violent crime by children and adolescents rose dramatically (Wilde, 1995). “Currently more than half of all serious crimes (e.g. murder, rape, assault, robbery) in the United States are committed by youths age 10-17” (Shulman, 1996, p. 170). Newscasts and daily newspapers are full of reports regarding youth violence.

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ANGER AND VIOLENCE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: CONFLICT RESOLUTION AS A METHOD OF PREVENTION

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Janae A. Griffith
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One of the most significant problems facing our country is violent crime. In the last few years, violent crime by children and adolescents rose dramatically (Wilde, 1995). “Currently more than half of all serious crimes (e.g. murder, rape, assault, robbery) in the United States are committed by youths age 10-17” (Shulman, 1996, p. 170). Newscasts and daily newspapers are full of reports regarding youth violence.

Educators are increasingly facing episodes of aggression and violence in schools (1988, cited in Myles & Simpson, 1994). In 1994, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reported that approximately three million attempted or completed assaults, rapes, robberies, or thefts occurred within school buildings or on school property, including 76,000 aggravated assaults and 350,000 simple assaults (Myles & Simpson, 1994). Boothe, Bradley, Flick, Keough, and Kirk (1994) noted that, “Schools, once considered a safe haven for nurturing the future leaders of America, seem to be experiencing the perils that lurk beyond the school yard” (p. 33).
School-age youth commit crimes in their own neighborhoods. These same destructive behaviors and aggressive attitudes come with troubled children into classrooms (Boothe et al., 1994). For students “steeped in the culture of violence” (Schreiber & Haberman, 1995, p. 70), classrooms often offer the last chance to expose them to more constructive ways of relating. King and Schwabenlender (1994) stated that one of the goals of educators and counselors is to help children cope with their emotions, modify maladaptive behavior, and learn effective coping skills. Educators and counselors need to teach children when and how to apply these skills to real life conditions. “With the increasing violence exhibited by juveniles in this country, major implications for prevention are directed at our school, specifically in the early grades” (Shulman, 1996, p. 178).

Anger and aggression can be directly linked to violence, health problems, and interpersonal difficulties (Wilde, 1995). Problematic behaviors of anger and aggression interfere with children’s adaptive functioning in school and in the family, as well as strain the tolerance limits of those in authority.
positions. Frequently, the repeated performance of aggressive behaviors results in severe negative consequences from family and community systems. Furthermore, the repeated experience of intense anger may become overwhelming for the child. Given this, it is clear that interventions for anticipated anger and aggression must be developed and implemented at an early age. One of the goals of the elementary school counselor is to help children deal positively with feelings of anger.

The focus of this research paper will be the effects of anger and violence on elementary-aged students. The causes of anger will be reviewed, along with possible solutions. Conflict resolution with peer mediation as a component will be described as a prevention program that can be implemented in elementary schools.

Definition of Anger and Aggression

Anger is a feeling that may include unpleasant thoughts, physical feelings, and behaviors (Furlong & Smith, 1994). It does not necessarily include inappropriate or destructive behavior. Johnson and Johnson (1987) defined anger as "a defensive emotional reaction that occurs when we are
frustrated, thwarted, or attacked” (p. 5:1). Furlong and Smith (1994) noted that anger is “a feeling of great displeasure, hostility, indignation or exasperation” (p. 39). According to Wilde (1995), anger can be expressed both positively and negatively.

Aggression often follows anger arousal. Furlong and Smith (1994) defined aggression as “the initiation of forceful, usually hostile, action against another: attack; hostile action or behavior” (p. 60). Aggression is hard to define because it includes many types of behaviors. Some of these behaviors are for survival and some are for blatant destruction and violence. It is important to remember that aggressive behavior may be caused by anger or it may be caused by biological brain-related influences that cannot be controlled, unless medicated (Furlong & Smith, 1994). Body chemicals such as testosterone and serotonin can also influence aggressive behavior (Studer, 1996). “Aggressive behavior is a complex mixture of biological factors and environmental factors” (Furlong & Smith, 1994, p. 61).
Physiological Reactions

Anger, whether suppressed or expressed, has many damaging effects on a person's health. It has been directly linked to heart disease and gastrointestinal difficulties as well as interference with the body's immune system (Wilde, 1995). Anger and hostility appear to play an important role in the development of hypertension. Anger can result in muscle tension, teeth grinding, piercing stares, headaches, and heart attacks (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Children who experience angry thoughts and actions create excessive body tension, often resulting in strained peer and adult relationships (King & Schwabenlender, 1994). Although elementary age children can develop some of these health related problems from anger, they usually occur at an older age. Early intervention to help manage anger is an important way to prevent these health related problems from occurring.

Causes of Anger and Violence

There is no single answer as to why children are angry, but there are some common conditions and situations that may
result in increased anger. Children may experience anger about situational factors such as poverty; disintegrating home environments; child abuse; a violent, materialistic culture; and pressure to achieve (Lindquist & Molnar, 1995). Children who are surrounded by violence and anger may tend to act in a similar way (Frey-Angel, 1989; Stalling, Holmes, & Butler, 1994). Brendtro and Long (1995) noted that fetal alcohol syndrome and crack babies are at risk for later violence because brain damage can impair cognitive controls and social bonding. These authors stated that only intact, rational, sober brains can control angry impulses. Socioeconomic status and family breakdown are two significant factors stated in the literature that may contribute to anger and aggression (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Boothe et al., 1994; Lindquist & Molnar, 1995; Myles & Simpson, 1994; Zinmeister, 1990).

**Socioeconomic Status**

Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994) focused on how socioeconomic disadvantage led to behavior problems. According to these authors, children in the lower socioeconomic classes are more likely than their peers to be
the objects of harsh discipline, to observe violence in their neighborhoods and extended families, and to have more transient peer groups and therefore fewer opportunities for stable friendships. Economic hardship acts as a stressor on the parents, leading to marital conflict, lowered quality of parenting, and ultimately child maladjustment (Dodge et al., 1994). Socioeconomic status is not the cause of family breakdown, but may be a factor.

Family Breakdown

Research supports the contention that family breakdown is the number one cause of anger in children (Boothe et al., 1994; Lindquist & Molnar, 1995; Myles & Simpson, 1994; Zinsmeister, 1990). More than 60% of all children born today will spend at least some time in a single parent household before reaching age eighteen. Single parenting is hard to manage both socially and financially, which can create stressful conditions for the family. This constant strain and confusion in the family can result in a child's anger toward parents and other family members. The lack of family support at home carries over into the schools in more ways than one.
Boothe et al., (1994) surveyed school administrators across the country. Boothe’s findings concluded that an increase in parental involvement in the schools would be a key factor in lowering the occurrence of school violence. The breakdown of the two-parent family, more mothers in the work force, the fast pace of society, and the latch-key syndrome were given as reasons for decreased parental involvement. A child’s anger and confusion toward home and school can affect performance, attitude, and behavior in daily activities.

Schools have had to take responsibility for significantly greater numbers of aggressive and violent students, often without parental support. Many schools today are under financial burdens, which results in staff reductions. These reductions lead to increased class sizes. Teachers, counselors, and other staff members have less time to address these problems of anger, aggression, and inappropriate behavior with students.

Possible Solutions

“Angry youths do not fare well in factory schools. They seem to gravitate toward other alienated people like gangs,
negative peer subcultures, or predatory adults like pimps, pedophiles, or criminal mentors” (Brendtro & Long, 1995, p. 54). Living in environments of violence, these children learn how to survive the best way possible which may not be acceptable to society. “For students steeped in the culture of violence, classrooms offer to them the last chance exposure of more constructive ways of relating” (Schreiber & Haberman, 1995, p. 70). Schools can provide attractive options to violent behavior and they can give students a pattern for positive social behavior.

“Schools must be sanctuaries where at a minimum physical safety is guaranteed” (Zinsmeister, 1990, p. 49). School boards and school staff have to be willing to change their philosophies. The emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic may need to be replaced with an emphasis on social skill development and conflict resolution. Schools are the primary public institution in the lives of children so they must take the first step to reach out to parents and the community to help improve the children’s problems of anger, aggression, and violence.
Redesigned Schools

Schools need to be redesigned so they are consistent, safe, loving environments. Boothe et al. (1994) stated that school boards and school staff should change policies when needed in order to meet the needs of the changing populations. Different interventions and prevention programs need to operate through and with parents, not around them. Parents are responsible for their children and parents should be held accountable. Unfortunately, some parents are not equipped with the necessary skills for adequately guiding their children.

Parent and family support systems provided by the schools can be the bridge to long-term solutions (Myles & Simpson, 1994). Schools could become neighborhood centers for evening classes for parenting, family living skills, job training, and adult education. These centers could collaborate with social agencies, service organizations, and church groups. Schools are a direct reflection of the community; therefore the redesigning of schools is a community effort.

Brendtro and Long (1995) noted that schools need to be early childhood and family support centers. They stressed the
importance of primary prevention by teaching self-discipline and conflict resolution to all students. Brendtro and Long's (1995) ideas for early intervention include identifying students as early as first grade and providing a variety of experiences in school, home, and community. These experiences may include the following: (a) mentoring children at risk because millions suffer from “affect hunger” (p. 54), (b) mentoring and training parents who have limited knowledge and resources, (c) targeting school bullies because peer harassment is an early indicator of lifelong problems, and (d) reaching resistant students.

Brendtro and Long (1995) discussed reinventing treatment by collaborating with mental health workers, alcohol counselors, and justice professionals who work in schools to provide “front line prevention” (p.55). By investing in counselors who can collaborate with these professionals, schools could intervene more effectively and at less cost. These professionals could work with students, families, and staff in order to better meet the needs of the population they serve.
Brendro and Long (1995) stressed the fact that both normal behavior and dysfunctional behavior come from the same roots. Educators and counselors could prevent and remedy student behavior problems by meeting developmental needs. A developmental counseling program could be designed to meet students' needs at an appropriate age or developmental level. A developmental program is seen as an integral and ongoing part of the total school curriculum, has a focus on primary prevention, and is built on interventions that actively seek to promote development (cited in Paisley & Benshoff, 1996). A necessary and important lesson that is taught and reinforced at all developmental levels is social skills.

Social Skills Development

The need to become a socially competent person in everyday life is a survival skill. Social competence includes getting along with others, working cooperatively in a group, developing peer relations, and being able to communicate effectively. Learning to deal effectively with conflict in peer groups can enhance social competence. Stalling, Holmes, and Butler (1994) stated that children who learn adequate skills
for social interaction are better able to negotiate conflict outcomes and may express a wider repertoire of styles for resolving conflict. Children who do not feel socially competent may feel inferior. Social skills deficits have been associated with aggressive behaviors (Furlong & Smith, 1994), whereas, socially competent children appear to deal with anger in relatively nondisruptive and direct ways (Eisenberg, Fabes, Nyman, Bernzqweig, & Pinuelas, 1994).

Social skills can be taught and reinforced in the classroom by the teachers and should be a main focus of the school counseling program. “Evidence suggests that even children who are temperamentally inhibited can change through purposeful action, action which is expressed in the social world in relationships with others” (Stalling et al., 1994, p. 6). Unfortunately, not all children have learned the lessons of social negotiations well enough to handle conflict. A popular approach that addresses proper social skills and problem solving techniques is conflict resolution.
Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation

Not all conflicts are harmful and not all conflicts lead to anger and violence (Stalling et al., 1994). Unfortunately, conflict can and often does involve negative or hurt feelings which may escalate into violence. Conflict resolution is an approach that teaches students to solve their own conflicts. "Most conflict resolution training programs seek to instill attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are conducive to effective, cooperative problem solving" (Shulman, 1996, p. 171). Conflict resolution also involves the expression of one's feelings and thoughts. Conflict resolution puts the power to negotiate into the hands of the students themselves by teaching them strategies and training students to be peer mediators. "Conflict resolution involves the expression of one's feeling, and thoughts. Therefore, active listening, empathy, critical thinking, problem solving, and the use of 'I messages' would all be skills that would apply to this process" (Shulman, 1996, p. 171).

Peer mediation is a skill building and problem solving process where students act as facilitators. The facilitator (or
mediator) helps identify problems and feelings between students. The process involves communication and responsibility that lead to an acceptable resolution to all parties involved. In some schools the counselor assumes the role of initially training students how to handle conflicts through mediation. After the program has been started the older students who have received training can be involved in the training of younger students. Shulman (1996) indicated that peer mediation enhances the self-esteem, grades, and attendance of the students trained as mediators. Some of the other benefits of school mediation programs are fewer discipline problems, increased problem solving skills, more student recognition, and less time spent by staff dealing with conflicts (Shulman, 1996). Training elementary aged students to solve their own conflicts is a powerful lesson in controlling anger and aggression before it escalates.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges that our schools are facing is the problem of violence and how to deal with conflict in a nonviolent way. School
counselors need to be proactive, to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding that will enable them to act on behalf of themselves and others in positive ways. (Phillips-Hershey & Kanage, 1996, p. 229)

Expressing anger constructively and controlling aggression can be one of the most difficult aspects of resolving conflicts. Boothe et al. (1994) stated that youngsters often find themselves in trouble in their personal relationships. This trouble can escalate the anger and propel the disagreement toward actual physical violence. Accepting anger as a natural and normal emotion and learning how to express it in a socially acceptable manner is the goal of counselors and educators today.

Acts of anger, aggression, and violence at an early age can serve as a predictor for a variety of negative outcomes. Higher levels of childhood aggression are predictive of later delinquency, conduct disorder, school maladjustment, and substance use (Lochman, Dunn, & Klimes-Dougan, 1993). The way children observe conflict being resolved also influences
the way they learn to deal with conflict in their own lives. Children who grow up in a family in which conflict is resolved through the use of power and intimidation will likely experience difficulty in resolving conflict by other means, such as negotiation (Stalling et al., 1994).

The school counselor, along with the staff, can implement conflict resolution as a means of teaching students positive ways to solve problems. Conflict resolution is also good for social development in children because it teaches self-sufficiency and it empowers the child. Peer mediation, which is part of conflict resolution, trains students to help solve other students’ problems.

Schools are constantly being looked at to solve society’s woes. Collaboration between school, home, and community is an important factor in the success of any school program. Prevention and early intervention is our hope for controlling anger and aggression and lowering the occurrence of violence and crime.
References


