

Training in Anger Management: an INSET Pack Introductory Paper

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Why is anger management of interest?

Anger as an emotion can be viewed either positively or negatively. Long and Fogell (1999) remind us that it is a key emotion for survival, allowing us to prepare for either fight or flight. Why then does anger seem to have such negative associations? Feindler and Ecton (1986) suggest that although there are a variety of adolescent behavioural problems, the most critical areas for intervention are those of anger and aggression. They suggest that these behaviours can interfere with how adolescents progress in school, how they get on in their family and can also put a strain on the tolerance levels of those in authority. Repeated aggressive or angry behaviours can result in negative consequences from school, community and family. If the anger is particularly intense, the adolescent may become overwhelmed by it. These views are endorsed by Faupel et al (1998), who assert that problem anger has a long-term effect on:

- physical and mental health
- family life and friendships
- success in school
- involvement with the law
- finances, both personal and social.

It is clear then that this is an area of concern not only for schools but for society as a whole.

Target Audience

This training pack has been prepared by three educational psychologists. The target audience includes fellow psychologists and teachers, education managers and policy makers and examples are drawn from both primary and secondary school sectors. However, it is recognised that the materials may be of equal interest to others involved with children, including social workers, youth workers, ancillary and voluntary staff. Thus, wherever possible, the issues are debated against a broad background. An 11-page Appendix offers suggestions for adapting the materials for use with parents.

The materials are printed in full in the booklet for ease of access, but they are also provided on the CD-ROM so that they can be edited and adapted by presenters for use with particular target audiences.

The Training Pack

Long and Fogell suggest that if we can understand anger better, we are likely to manage it more effectively. The in-service training package, therefore, starts off with a unit on *Understanding Anger*. The unit allows participants to discuss anger in some depth, examining instances of their own anger and discussing what strategies they have found helpful when coping with anger. Participants are encouraged to think about the physiological signs of anger and are introduced to the concept of the *assault cycle* (Breakwell 1997).

Anger does not take place in isolation but needs to be seen in its social context. Unit 2 *A Whole School Approach to Anger Management* is aimed mainly at teachers, managers and other adults working in a school or educational setting. However, adults working in other settings could adapt the ideas and activities. It makes the key assumption that the context within which behaviour occurs is important and that it is possible to change behaviour by making changes to that context.

The unit begins by looking at why it is important to address the issue of anger management in society in general and in schools in particular. As such, it develops the themes already outlined in the first unit. The unit then considers some of the features and components of school-wide behavioural management systems. A checklist is provided for use by staff involved in the development of a school policy on anger management. There are some useful guidelines on the process of drawing up a whole school policy.

It is intended that participants will gain a broader theoretical understanding of the issues surrounding the implementation of a whole school approach to anger management and will begin to consider how these issues can be addressed in their own schools and establishments.

The twin objectives of Unit 3 *Dealing with Conflict and Aggression* are (i) to provide information on strategies for dealing with aggression and (ii) to create opportunities for sharing good practice.

It is recognised that individuals vary with regard to the situations to which they respond (*triggers*) and the manner in which they respond to those situations (*behaviour*). A key assumption is that such differences are learned rather than innate, and as such the behaviours are open to change. Although there is some discussion as to possible causes of aggressive responses and loss of self-control in children and young people, the main focus is on strategies for intervention and support.

If Unit 1 introduces participants to the 5 stages of the assault cycle (Breakwell, 1997), Unit 3 examines the strategies that are appropriate at each of the stages. The *trigger* stage is the event that sets off the anger reaction. At this point, it is still possible to intervene to calm a person down or for the person to calm himself or herself down. Once the *escalation* phase is reached, there is less chance of the individual calming down, as this is the stage at which the body prepares for fight or flight. Physiological arousal of the autonomic nervous system produces changes, some of which are observable and therefore can act as clues to the person's state. These observable signs act as early warning signals for teachers and others.

A number of defusing techniques are described, which can be used to help defuse anger and reduce the level of physiological arousal. These can be applied both at the *trigger* and at an early part of the *escalation* phase.

By the later part of the *escalation* phase and certainly by the *crisis* phase of the assault cycle it is reckoned that the individual is unable to respond to calming techniques. The *crisis* phase is the point at which, to use a firework analogy, the firework explodes. A number of guidelines are outlined for use by teachers and adults when dealing with such a crisis.

The implications of both the *recovery* phase and the *post-crisis* phase of depression are considered. It is important that adults confronted by an angry pupil are aware of these stages and can take appropriate action to support the young person at these times.

Finally, there is some consideration of the need for support for those adults who have been involved in aggressive incidents. These include both formal and informal mechanisms within a school or establishment. Here a link with whole school approaches to anger management (Unit 2) can be made.

The need, at times, for a more individual approach is recognised in Unit 4 *Running a Group – Cognitive Behavioural Approaches*. This unit gives advice to those wishing to set up a programme of groupwork for children. There are a number of ways of working directly with young people to help them manage their anger. These include behavioural approaches, family interventions and social skills training.

Traditionally, the behaviourist approach has been the most popular one. Feindler and Ecton (1986) argue that although there are many documented instances of the effectiveness of reward systems (operant control techniques), much of the research has focussed on unusual populations living in institutional settings. If the same people are taken out of their sheltered setting, the programmes tend to be less effective, and there have been very few reports of transfer and long term maintenance of these programmes to real life settings. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Lane and Burchard (1983), for example, suggest that behavioural modification programmes foster a dependency on contingencies that are too artificial and therefore cannot be maintained. In schools it can be difficult to find a good reward system: reinforcers from peers can be much more powerful than those of authority figures (why bother working for points from a teacher if you can be rewarded with peer approval for misbehaviour?). Another difficulty is that the target behaviour may be so infrequent or hidden that it becomes impossible for an adult to offer immediate consequences. Inconsistency, too, is a factor: it can be difficult to ensure that others carry out the programme in the desired way. If they don't do this and therefore ignore the desired changes, then the young people are likely to return to their old ways. Finally, developmental factors have an influence. How realistic is it to expect compliance to a behaviour modification programme from an adolescent at the very time when even the quietest adolescent may be rebellious?

Other methods too have had limited success. Family interventions, including the teaching of problem-solving skills and communication skills acquisition, have not on the whole been rigorously evaluated. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn as to their effectiveness. Like behavioural methods, social skills training tends to show poor maintenance of early short-term gains.

Cognitive behavioural approaches, on the other hand, have a more impressive success rate. These include a variety of techniques such as self-control training, awareness of anger arousal and self- instruction. Feindler and Ecton (1986) describe a number of interventions using these techniques. One study used cognitive behavioural techniques successfully for anger control, finding that an eleven week training programme reduced

aggressive and disruptive behaviour and led to improvements in self-control, problem solving ability and social skills. As a result, 90% of the participants made successful transitions to community living.

Unit 4, therefore, discusses a number of cognitive behavioural approaches that can be used in school. These include relaxation, self-instruction training, assertiveness training, becoming self-aware and using anger spoilers. The unit also offers guidelines for setting up a group-work approach in school.

References

Breakwell G M (1997) Coping with Aggressive Behaviour Leicester: British Psychological Service.

Faupel A, Herrick E and Sharp P (1998) Anger Management: a Practical Guide London: David Fulton publishers.

Feindler E L and Ecton R B (1986) Adolescent Anger Control, Cognitive Behavioural Techniques New York: Pergamon Press.