

Unit 2: A Whole School Approach to Anger Management Text Handout

Rationale

Anger is a very powerful emotion, which when properly channelled can be a positive and productive force for change. When this does not happen, anger can be a destructive force leading to aggressive outbursts. Such outbursts can be distressing for those directly involved and for those who witness the aggression.

It is important that members of the teaching profession have an understanding of anger, its expression and ways of managing anger in themselves and others. There is a high probability during their teaching careers that they will encounter instances of aggressive behaviour in a school setting. These could cover a number of permutations including pupil to teacher; pupil to pupil; teacher to pupil; teacher to teacher; parent to teacher and teacher to parent. These behaviours could range from relatively minor instances of verbal abuse to serious physical assault. It is important to stress that serious incidents are comparatively rare. Minor incidents are far more common but cumulatively these can result in high levels of stress.

The development of an anger management strategy in a school may be considered as part of a whole school approach to managing behaviour. Why should a school consider having a school-wide system to managing behaviour?

Firstly, we should consider the issue of discipline. In a typical school community, there is a need on the one hand to discourage difficult and disruptive behaviour through recourse to appropriate sanctions. On the other hand, there is a need to notice, acknowledge and reward appropriate *prosocial* behaviour. A school-wide behavioural management system balances the need to manage behaviour with training in self-discipline. A proactive, positive whole school discipline system moves beyond traditional punishment approaches by providing opportunities for all children to learn self-discipline. From a preventative standpoint, all schools can benefit from a clearly defined, consistently enforced behavioural management system which is designed to support pupils in managing their own behaviour.

Secondly, we should consider the issue of stress. Seaward (1997) defines stress as “the inability to cope with a perceived or real (or imagined) threat to one’s mental, physical,

and spiritual well-being which results in a series of physiological responses and adaptations". Massey (1998a) adds that, as well as responding physiologically, people may respond cognitively and emotionally to stress. Thus, stress impacts on our cognition, physiology and emotions. Seaward makes reference to studies which indicate that 70-80% of all disease and illness can be stress-related (1997).

Schools have a key role to play in tackling stress. It is important that we give our young people opportunities to develop the life skills that will help them cope with daily stresses, major life events and change. There is considerable overlap between approaches recommended for stress management and those recommended for anger management. One could argue that by considering and developing a whole school anger management strategy, one is also addressing the related issue of stress. One could further argue that this would benefit the lives not only of the young people in the school but of all the adults who form a part of that community.

The school environment has a key role to play in tackling stress. It is important that we provide a safe and nurturing environment for staff and students alike. School safety has been to the fore in recent years. The installation of secure entry systems and passes is now a common feature of schools. The tragedy in Dunblane and other high profile incidents throughout the world have provided the impetus for such measures.

It is critical that teachers and other staff are healthy emotionally as well as physically, in order that they can manage their own lives as well as those of the children and young people in their care. There are a number of ways that this can be tackled, including health education and incentives to join sports clubs.

Various areas of the curriculum provide opportunities to promote stress management. It has been demonstrated that life skill programmes which incorporate strategies such as relaxation and problem solving are successful in teaching children and adolescents how to control their stress. It is easy to see how stress management techniques form a natural component of health education and physical education programmes. Stress management may also be covered within language arts (literature, personal writing); social subjects; religious education; science (physiology of the stress and relaxation responses); art and music.

Thirdly, we should consider the issue of violence. We have all been horrified by recent media-reported incidents of violence in schools in this country and elsewhere in the

world. These have led to calls for legislation to control access to and use of such implements as firearms and knives. Our children are exposed to increasing levels of violence. In 1997 The Children's Defense Fund reported that every day in America 10 children were murdered, 16 died from guns, 316 were arrested for crimes of violence and 8042 were reported abused or neglected.

The psychological effects of violence on children are well known. Violent children usually come from violent homes, where parents model violence as a means of resolving conflict and handling stress. In the book edited by Peled, Jaffe and Edleson (1995) it is reported that children who witness violence can display an array of emotional and behavioural disturbances, including low self-esteem, withdrawal, nightmares, self-blame, and aggression against peers, family members and property. Massey (1998b) refers to a number of research studies which show that chronic exposure to violence adversely affects a child's ability to learn. It is known that children who achieve in school and develop such skills as critical thinking, communication and problem solving are better able to cope with life situations, including those that are stressful and perhaps dangerous. It is, therefore, important that we intervene at an early stage to help children develop the thinking, communication and empathic skills to be able to deal with aggression, conflict and confrontation.

What can schools and teachers do? They need to work in partnership with parents and others in the community to address the issue of violence, as no one group or agency has sole responsibility for this area. Teachers can model appropriate ways of managing problems, conflict, anger and stress. They can teach children that feelings are normal - even feelings of anger or hurt - but that violence is not an acceptable way of expressing anger, frustration and other negative feelings. They can help children learn how to deal with emotions without resorting to the use of violence. They can teach children ways to avoid becoming victims of violent acts through emphasis on personal safety.

Features and components

Fitzsimmons (1998) considers school-wide behavioural management systems. She identifies four common features of these systems. These are:

- Total staff commitment to managing behaviour.

- Clearly defined and well communicated sets of expectations and rules. Consequences made explicit and clear procedures for correcting rule-breaking behaviours.
- An instructional component for teaching pupils self-control and/or social skill strategies.
- A support plan to address the needs of students with chronic, challenging behaviours.

Faupel et al (1998) identify four main components of a positive behaviour management policy. These are:

- whole-school environment
- rewards and sanctions
- teaching of new behaviours
- approaches to handling crises.

It can be seen that there is considerable similarity and overlap between these two sets of features. Furthermore, it should be noted that it is rare to see specific reference to anger management policies. They tend to be subsumed within general behaviour management policies.

Faupel et al comment that, "Very few behaviour policies drawn up by schools currently address the issue of anger, and many simply expect children to conform and have no explicit strategies for either reacting effectively, or, better still, teaching children how they might better manage their anger at school" (1998, p. 37).

A useful checklist for schools considering drawing up an anger management strategy is the Ten Features of Success, highlighted in the study *Success against the Odds: Effective Schools in Disadvantaged Areas*. This was a study conducted in 1996 by the National Commission on Education. Faupel and colleagues argue that these factors are highly likely to be features of schools which have excellent records in the management of behaviour. Furthermore, they propose that a school could use each of these headings to design part of their anger management strategy. They offer a summarised version of the ten features of success (Faupel et al, 1998, p. 37). These are:

1. Strong leadership by the head teacher in identifying anger management as a priority component of a behaviour policy.
2. Good atmosphere from shared values and attractive environment – for example, values concerning anger management.
3. High expectations of pupils in terms of effective anger management.
4. Clear focus on teaching and learning of anger management strategies for teachers and pupils to use.
5. Good assessment of pupils.
6. Pupils sharing responsibility for learning.
7. Pupils participating in the life of the school.
8. Incentives for pupils to succeed.
9. Parental involvement.
10. Extra-curricular activities to broaden pupils' interests and build good relationships in school.

Process

Let us now consider the process whereby a school can set up a school-wide anger management strategy as part of its overall approach to managing behaviour.

Faupel et al (op cit) note that, as with the management of behaviour, there are three levels at which children's anger management may be considered. These are the whole school level, the classroom/group level and the individual pupil level.

At the whole school level, a number of steps in the process can be identified. A well-developed whole school policy should consider and have an impact on school life at all three levels. The steps are outlined as follows:

1. Establish that there is a need for an anger management strategy. It may be helpful to carry out an audit of the current status.
2. Establish that there is commitment amongst staff for the establishment and implementation of the policy. Staff consultation and some initial training may form a part of this process.
3. Prioritise and incorporate an anger management strategy within the school's development plan. This should include an action plan with time scales, targets and identified personnel.
4. Consider practices that have a sound research base and/or a proven record.
5. Consider preventative approaches as well as interventions/guidelines for tackling instances of aggressive behaviour.
6. Incorporate arrangements that monitor, evaluate and review procedures and practices. Be prepared to modify or abandon ineffective procedures.

References

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