

## **Unit 3: Dealing with Aggression and Conflict Text Handout**

### **Causes of Aggressive Behaviour**

Anger is a very natural emotion. The triggers we react to and the ways in which we respond vary from individual to individual.

We may develop habitual ways of responding to situations. Some people may tend to respond in a passive way, e.g. meekly accepting harsh criticism from a boss or a colleague. Others may habitually respond in an aggressive way to such criticism.

These reactions and responses tend to be learned rather than innate behaviours. As such, it is possible to learn different responses by acquiring new skills to deal with situations differently.

We can all learn to respond in assertive ways. Our legitimate anger can be used in a constructive way to express our thoughts and feelings about an unjust situation. This can apply equally to aspects of our personal relationships and to perceived social injustices.

When we are lacking in confidence and have low self-esteem it is more likely that we will tend to respond in less appropriate ways. We may react in an overly aggressive manner to a perceived injustice. This may be effective in the short-term but not in the longer term. Alternatively, we may react in a meek, submissive fashion. This may reflect fear and insecurity.

### **Angry Pupils**

In the classroom, there can be many reasons why a child or young person is angry. Children, just like adults, have a right to feel angry. It is when they respond in ways that infringe the rights of other people that expressed anger becomes a problem. Children, like adults, have scripts which they carry i.e. learned ways of dealing with situations. Children learn from those around them. They model their behaviour on significant others: parents, teachers, and peers.

It is helpful to look behind the observed behaviour and to consider some of the causes of aggressive responses. Rob Long (1999a) suggests that common causes of aggressive behaviour include:

- learning difficulties
- aggressive role models
- bullying
- depression
- abuse, emotional and/or sexual.

There are some children who find it hard to exercise self-control. Terms such as *impulsive* and has a *short fuse* are used when describing these young people. Following the fuse analogy, it is as though they go straight from the match igniting the fuse to the explosion, without any mediatory thoughts, feeling or behaviours.

In most societies, impulsive behaviour is viewed as unacceptable and is modified through socialization at home and in school. Nevertheless, there are some children who continue to experience difficulties with self-control.

Again, Long (1999b) lists a number of reasons why some children lack self-control:

- attention deficit disorder
- neurological damage
- drug abuse
- learning difficulties
- parenting style
- acute anxiety.

These lists are not comprehensive. We could all add to them from our own knowledge and experience of children.

## **Dealing with Aggression and Conflict in the Classroom**

Aggressive displays by a pupil can be a frightening, stressful and potentially undermining for the class teacher. By understanding a few basic principles and techniques, it is possible to prepare yourself to deal with such incidents in a more confident and effective manner. There are no easy solutions. These guidelines should be applied in a flexible way. The relationship which the teacher has with the pupil will be a critical factor.

## 1 Early warning signs

There are times when we can tell that a child is *uptight* or *ready to explode*. There are observable signs. Teachers should observe and respond appropriately to these tell-tale early warning signs. This may be the opportunity to stop the anger developing into an outburst.

Early warning signs can include any of the following (from Faupel et al 1998; Long 1999a):

- physical agitation and fidgety behaviour
- change in facial colouring (deepens then goes pale)
- facial expression
- increase in breathing rate
- increase in perspiration
- changes in pattern of eye contact
- dilating of pupils
- changes in body posture (e.g. tensed muscles, haunched shoulders)
- louder tone of voice and faster rate of speaking
- verbal challenges
- change of position in the classroom
- quicker movements
- easily distracted, unfocused
- rapid mood swings
- over sensitivity to suggestions or criticisms.

These are all signs that indicate that the child is in a heightened state of arousal. The child's body is being prepared for a flight or fight response. How should you respond to these signs? Should you ignore them? If you intervene will it make matters worse? It is unhelpful to ignore the signs of an aggressive outburst as they signify the beginning of an anger reaction that has a momentum of its own once it is fully developed.

## 2 Defusing techniques

There are a number of recognised strategies that help staff to defuse anger and reduce the level of physiological arousal.

**(a) *Body position***

Avoid face to face positions as these are challenging. Try to angle your body slightly e.g. by shifting your balance.

Be aware of the child's personal space. Try not to enter this, but be careful also not to be too far away, as this may give a message that you are being aloof or evasive. Personal space is usually the area 6 to 8 inches around the body.

**(b) *Body movements and gestures***

Avoid any movements or gestures which could be construed as threatening e.g. waving your arms around, folding your arms, pointing your index finger. Gestures which show your palms and / or which reinforce a verbal message are less threatening.

**(c) *Matching mood***

There is a need to balance staying calm and controlled and with recognizing the emotional state of the child. On the one hand, it would be counterproductive to become equally angry. On the other hand, it would be artificial and contrived to appear too calm. A more acceptable balance is to recognise and acknowledge the child's emotional state and express a concern and desire to seek a solution to the child's difficulty.

**(d) *Eye contact***

In normal social interactions, we tend to look at each other for no more than one to two seconds at a time. The speaker tends to use less eye contact than the listener. In an aggressive situation, the aggressor may use more eye contact than is normal. Your eye contact should be brief and frequent so as not to fuel the anger and increase the aggression.

**(e) *Communication***

What you say and the way you say it are crucial in your efforts to defuse the aggressive reaction.

Your aim is to let the young person know that you are listening to what they have to say and that you respect their views. Active listening involves checking things out and thus showing the child that you are keen to understand what they are saying to you. The use of reflection (repeating/rephrasing what the child has just said) communicates both a desire to understand and an appreciation of the child's perspective.

Throughout the interaction, you stay in control of the situation but you also help the young person feel more secure, as they also feel more in control.

The other message that you want to communicate is a desire to find a solution to the difficulty, e.g. “ I can see you are upset. Let’s spend a few minutes together and see if we can sort things out.”

**(f) Humour**

This can be very effective. Laughter acts as an antidote for anger. However, humour should be used with considerable caution as it *can* have an effect opposite to that intended.

**(g) Distraction / change of activity**

This works by taking the child’s focus away from their distress. It is likely to be more effective with younger children e.g. use of a favourite toy; pointing to something else that is happening.

**(h) Change of location**

Removing the child from the context in which they are upset may help to defuse an aggressive reaction. This approach needs to be used judiciously, using your knowledge of the child and the situation.

**(i) Relaxation**

Where the child is familiar with relaxation techniques, a helpful reminder may be useful at this juncture. Relaxation helps by reducing the physiological arousal that accompanies the build up of anger.

**3 Crisis management**

The crisis stage in an aggressive incident is the point at which, to use the firework analogy, the firework explodes. It is very difficult for the child to listen to you and understand what you are saying at this stage. How do you respond when a child has lost control and is a potential danger to self and others? The following guidelines are based on approaches recommended in Chapter 9 of Faupel et al (1998) and further influenced by ideas expressed in MacGrath (1998):

**(a) *Stay in control***

Be aware of your own mental and physiological state. Use relaxation techniques and self-instruction techniques to help maintain your composure.

**(b) *Use clear explicit language***

Short, unambiguous statements presented in a firm manner. You may use the 'broken record' technique.

**(c) *Avoid confrontational language***

It is very easy to slip into language that further fuels the situation.

**(d) *Be aware of exits in the room and position yourself appropriately***

Should the situation deteriorate and your safety be at risk, you should be ready to leave by the nearest exit to get help and assistance.

**(e) *Keep a safe distance***

The pupil may become physically aggressive, so keep a safe distance based on your assessment of the situation.

**(f) *Remove any audience***

This provides the dual function of removing other pupils from a potentially dangerous situation and allowing you to deal with the situation in a private manner.

**(g) *Call for help and inform pupil of this action***

You may ask another pupil to get help. Ideally, there should be a school policy and procedures for this eventuality.

**(h) *Remove any potential weapons***

Be aware of any objects nearby which could act as weapons and remove them if possible.

**(i) *Use non-threatening body language***

See previous section on defusing techniques.

**(j) *Frequent but brief eye contact***

See previous section on defusing techniques.

**(k) *Physical intervention***

This should be a last resort where there is real danger to the personal safety of you, the pupil or others present. It may also be considered where there is risk of significant damage to property. The intervention should be the minimal necessary to prevent harm or damage to property.

There should be clear policy guidelines in schools, and staff should be trained and confident about the use of physical intervention. Legal advice should be sought when setting up such guidelines.

**4 Afterwards**

After an aggressive outburst, there is a recovery stage during which the anger begins to lessen and the physiological state returns to normal. This recovery stage can take between 45 minutes and 90 minutes depending on the individual and the severity of the incident.

After the recovery stage, the pupil may experience negative feelings such as guilt, sadness, and unhappiness. This is also the stage at which the pupil is able to listen and think more clearly about what has happened. Using a solution focused approach you can support the pupil to identify ways forward.

For the adults involved, there is still a need for debriefing. This may be at an informal level but there may need to be a formal mechanism in the school to deal with such matters. Such incidents are physically, mentally and emotionally draining for those involved. An opportunity to talk about what led up to the incident, the incident itself, how you handled it and your feelings about the event should be available to you when you require it. We all differ in how we respond to such situations and these differences should be recognised and respected.

**References**

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

**Long R (1999a)** Challenging Confrontation: Information and Techniques for School Staff Tamworth: Nasen.

**Long R (1999b)** Exercising Self-Control Tamworth: Nasen.

**MacGrath M (1998)** The Art of Teaching Peacefully London: David Fulton Publishers.