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Destructive Anger Among Adolescents: Management Strategies for Principals and Teachers


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Destructive **ANGER** Among Adolescents:



Prevention and Management Strategies for Educators

At the beginning of a lesson on decimals, Jim Forman,¹ an 8th-grade math teacher, was interrupted by 14-year-old Lisa's scream. "Who stole my cell phone?" she shouted. Without waiting for an answer, she accused Sarah of the offense. Sarah denied the allegation, but Lisa kept screaming, threatening to punch Sarah if her phone was not returned immediately. With clenched fists, Lisa advanced on Sarah, while the other students, sensing an explosive and escalating situation,

moved quickly toward the exit. Mr. Forman pressed the emergency call button and placed himself as a shield between Sarah and Lisa.

This was not the first time that Lisa's anger had gotten her into problems at school. She had been suspended twice within the past six months.

This incident shows the serious potential of explosive rage among adolescents and the need for proper anger management at school. This article will provide information to aid readers in understanding risk factors associated with adolescent anger. It will also recommend strategies to prevent and de-

fuse anger, and discuss the role of spiritual nurture in promoting proper conduct and positive relationships among students.

Understanding Anger

Anger may be viewed as "an acute emotional reaction elicited by any of a number of stimulating situations including threat, overt aggression, restraint, verbal attack, disappointment, or frustration."² It triggers physiological and biological changes, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure, high energy levels, and a rise in adrena-

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lin, noradrenalin, and hormones.³

Anger manifests itself both outwardly in physical and verbal aggression, and inwardly in various forms of self-harm. School personnel are confronted not only with the direct effects of anger and aggression, such as threats of violence and fighting among students, but also with the indirect effects such as learning difficulties and social adjustment problems.⁴

Adolescents' anger may be triggered and/or intensified by feelings of frustration, which are often linked to the normal maturation process, during which they experience a desire for greater privacy and independence. Young people may also experience additional stress from attempting to cope with the increased academic, social, and work demands involved in transitioning to adulthood. Some adolescents express their anger covertly by withdrawing from social activities or not following through with their home or classroom obligations, while others express it overtly by screaming, throwing objects, or slamming doors.⁵ Some may exhibit both overt and covert anger behaviors.

In 2012, the Los Angeles-based Josephson Institute of Ethics conducted a survey of 23,000 high school students across the United States regarding their perceptions and attitudes toward violence and bullying. The survey found that 33 percent of boys and 17 percent of girls agreed that it is sometimes OK to hit or threaten a person who has made them angry. Fifty percent of boys and 37 percent of girls admitted hitting a person in the past year because they were angry. Thirty percent of boys and 32 percent of girls said that physical violence (fighting, bullying, and intimidation) was a big problem at their school.⁶

The problem of adolescent anger, violence, and aggression is not limited to the United States, but occurs worldwide. Here are just three examples:

- A 2012 study on school violence in South Africa revealed that 22.2 percent of students had faced some form of violence while in school in a one-year period (August 2011 to August 2012).⁷

- In 2011-2012, children in United Kingdom schools were expelled or suspended on 17,520 occasions for physically assaulting adults, an equivalent of 90 incidents a day during the academic year.⁸

- The Australian Institute of Criminology reported that the rate of assaults in the 15-19 age group was 886 per 100,000 people in 2011, compared to a rate of 85 per 100,000 in the 55-59 age group.⁹

Risk Factors for Anger Among Adolescents

Anger among adolescents can be attributed to the many stressors, including: (1) peer pressure to conform to values and ideologies that may conflict with family and/or societal norms; (2) adjusting to the demands and expectations of school; (3) coping with physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by parents, teachers, and/or significant others; and (4) grappling with feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, and helplessness. Other stressors, such as parental divorce or death, poverty, neglect, and alcoholism, as well as bullying by peers may trigger angry outbursts in adolescents.¹⁰ Additionally, young people reared in homes where violence is regarded as an acceptable solution to problems are at greater risk.

Anger has been identified as a powerful risk factor for school violence, especially when it culminates in sudden rage.¹¹ If anger is not controlled or managed, it may lead to destructive and debilitating behaviors that harm not only intended victims, but also the perpetrators and initiators.

Anger-related disruptive behavior not only creates classroom-management challenges, but also interferes with learning by other students.¹² However, educators can apply research-based intervention strategies to help adolescents discover more constructive ways to deal with anger. As the result of such interventions, adolescents should be able to (1) recognize and identify the negative emotions behind their

anger; (2) identify, challenge, and replace unrealistic conclusions and expectations; (3) learn relaxation strategies to maintain composure, and (4) develop problem-solving skills.¹³

Classroom-based Anger Management Approaches

Before each academic year, teachers need to specify academic and social expectations for students as part of overall curriculum planning, and implement the following proactive approaches to create and maintain a positive classroom climate:

- *Create caring classroom communities* where children are loved and respected, regardless of their racial, ethnic, religious, socio-cultural background, or temperament. This will help children struggling with anger issues to develop social, emotional, and academic competencies and prepare them to become productive citizens.¹⁴

- *Give students a voice.* When teachers are not interested in what students have to say, students feel ignored and disrespected, which leads to wounded egos and may evoke angry responses and conflict. Giving students a voice does not mean that they have the final say, but does convey teacher commitment to consider students' ideas and suggestions regarding rules of conduct, learning styles, and course activities.¹⁵ It also means that students share in decision-making about the curriculum and extracurricular activities. This collaborative relationship will help young people make informed choices regarding friendships, dating, and careers. Teachers and students can work together to construct knowledge¹⁶ by engaging in brainstorming activities that generate hypotheses, assumptions, and theories about a variety of issues, which will prepare young people to deal with the challenges and complexities of life. Throughout this process, the teacher serves as a facilitator and role model, as well as a source of knowledge.¹⁷

- *Develop and implement an effective discipline policy.* Ensure that the classroom management policy is firmly rooted in a well-articulated code that

specifies the rights and responsibilities of both students and staff members, and identifies both desirable and undesirable behaviors.¹⁸

- *Select appropriate and functional rules as well as behavioral expectations.* Rules should focus on student behavior and facilitate instruction and learning, covering topics such as coming to class prepared and on time, following teacher directions, participating in class activities, staying on task, and completing assignments.¹⁹ Research has confirmed the value of establishing rules and procedures for general classroom behavior, group work, seatwork, transitions and interruptions, use of materials and equipment, and beginning and ending the instructional period or day. These rules and procedures should be chosen and implemented as the result of discussion and mutual consent by teacher and students.²⁰

- *Establish behavioral expectations.* The school should define and communicate clear expectations and spell out consequences for student misbehavior. Penalties for infractions of the rules may range in severity from verbal and written warnings, to suspension (in-school and/or out of school) and expulsion.

- *Maintain momentum in lessons.* Keep the lesson moving at an appropriate and flexible pace, incorporating smooth transitions and variety. Avoid abrupt transitions, such as announcing a new activity before gaining the students' attention, or starting a new activity in the middle of another activity. Discipline problems may arise if teachers work with students one at a time while forcing the rest of the class to wait and watch.²¹

- *Create a culture of peace.* Infusing peace education into curriculum areas such as moral education, social studies,

health, language arts, and physical education will go a long way to creating and maintaining a culture of peace and ensuring that students feel safe and happy. Both within and outside the classroom, teachers should promote peace themes such as appreciation of diversity, effective communication, expressing emotions appropriately, cooperation and friendship, and resolving conflicts.²²

Helpful Strategies to Prevent and Contain Angry Outbursts

Reflect for a moment on the angry outburst in Jim Forman's classroom. If

Research has confirmed the value of establishing rules and procedures for general classroom behavior, group work, seatwork, transitions, and interruptions, use of materials and equipment, and beginning and ending the instructional period or day.

you encountered a similar situation, what would you do? How would you defuse other potentially explosive situations? The following classroom-based interventions, when used appropriately by teachers or other school personnel, can diminish or eliminate violent confrontations:

- *Remain calm.* Use a simple stress-reduction technique before responding to a student's provocative remark or behavior. For example, take a deep breath and let it out slowly, or mentally count to 10. This will put you in a calm, relaxed state, and give you time to think about appropriate responses, rather than reacting immediately and instinctively to the student's behavior.²³

- *Avoid actions that exacerbate the situation.* Arguing, defensiveness, agita-

tion, or anger may lead to an escalation. Be careful not to shout or take the behavior personally. Do not invade the student's personal space by touching or grabbing him or her.²⁴

- *Keep responses brief* when addressing confrontational students. Do not reward them with unnecessary attention by asking irrelevant questions such as "Why are you interrupting my lesson?" Avoid nagging and reprimanding²⁵; instead, ask open-ended questions focused on the situation. In the incident involving Lisa, Mr. Forman could ask her, "What do you think made you angry with Sarah?" "Where were you when you realized that your cell phone was missing?"

- *Try to understand the student's emotions.* Mr. Forman, being aware of Lisa's frustration, can convey to her that he understands what she is experiencing. He may respond by saying, "I see that you are very frustrated; can you tell me what's wrong?" This approach may help de-escalate the situation and give Lisa the opportunity to acknowledge and process her feelings, rather than acting on them in an inappropriate way.²⁶

- *Remove the student's peers* from the room if he or she continues to be disruptive, aggressive, and defiant. This move will likely deter the student from engaging in face-saving aggression.²⁷

- *Ask another student to inform the principal* of the situation, or if escalation occurs, use a school-wide emergency lock-down system that relays electronic signals to the principal, staff, students, and local law-enforcement personnel that a potentially explosive and dangerous situation is occurring. In the interim, before additional personnel arrive on the scene, maintain a calm demeanor and steady voice, despite any additional disrespectful state-

ments or threats from the student.²⁸

- *Apply appropriate consequences,* based on contingency contracts and/or a school-wide violence prevention and intervention plan.

Strategies for Crisis Intervention in Small Schools

The aforementioned strategies may prove to be difficult to implement in a one-room school, so the teacher will need to ensure his or her safety, and the safety of the students by carrying out the following procedures:

- *Assume a non-threatening stance,* putting your body at an angle to the disruptive student. Keep your hands empty and at your side in plain sight.²⁹ Exude calmness and control.

- *Evacuate the students from the building, and direct them to a safe area.* Instruct older students regarding procedures for assisting the younger ones.

- *During the evacuation, identify two or three trustworthy students whose responsibility is to alert neighbors, parents, law enforcement, and/or social service agencies about what is transpiring.*

The success of these interventions depends on the effectiveness of a school-wide violence prevention plan. The principal/teacher should take the lead in (1) scheduling regular school preparedness drills; (2) establishing guidelines for evacuation from the school; (3) reinforcing school-wide behavioral expectations; and (4) promoting partnerships with homes and community agencies, which will strengthen the school's efforts to provide a safe environment for learning.

School-wide Anger Management Programs

Classroom-based anger-management strategies will prove ineffective unless school-wide efforts are implemented. This broader approach will require collaboration among teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community leaders; and should focus on preventative measures intended to ensure the safety of all school personnel and establish an optimal learning climate.

An effective school-wide approach to discipline requires more than a list

of rules. Clearly stated expectations understood by everyone in the school are essential to deal effectively with student behavior.

Assessing the institution's discipline needs is the *first step* in developing a school-wide plan. For example, the staff and the administration might begin by discussing behavior issues, determining their collective and individual strengths and weaknesses in terms of discipline, and exploring how current policies help or harm the overall school climate.³⁰ The *second step* is to train staff members in emotional de-escalation, self-restraint, and safe evacuation/lockdown procedures. Plans for dealing with students who have a history of frequent and serious problems with anger and aggression will require primary instructional staff to be skilled in crisis response. Procedures for implementing room evacuations and contacting support personnel should be clearly articulated. (Many local law enforcement agencies are willing to train school personnel in these techniques.)³¹ The *third step* is to incorporate or adapt programs that have effectively reduced the incidence of destructive anger in school environments such as mentoring, community service, conflict resolution, and anger management groups.

Mentoring is one of the most popular and effective intervention strategies used today to help adolescents with behavioral issues.³²

A mentor not only helps guide students in making better decisions, but also serves as an accountability partner, pointing out when students are wrong, and challenging their thinking process about events that may have triggered previous outbursts.

Mentors can be older students, teachers, parents/relatives, and community members. Teachers and/or other qualified staff can train older and more experienced students to help mentor younger students with behavioral problems. Teachers can also serve as mentors. The personal relationship between a teacher and a child can make

all the difference in the teacher's ability to positively influence the child's life.³³ Involving parents, guardians, and other caregivers in the mentoring process will also yield positive changes in youth and improve program outcomes.³⁴ Church members, community volunteers, and professionals with expertise in the areas of counseling, psychology, social work, and special education can assist school personnel in this activity.

Other Useful Strategies

Community-service activities can help angry teens to experience a sense of usefulness and belongingness. Seeing how their work positively impacts the lives of others can be quite therapeutic as participants feel a sense of satisfaction from assisting people in need. These types of activities can also strengthen participants' sense of personal potency.³⁵ However, it is essential that such activities be closely monitored and supervised by responsible personnel from the school or the community.

Conflict-resolution programs are also useful in reducing aggression, anger, and violence in schools. These programs provide students with practical lessons in a number of areas, such as: (1) active listening; (2) conflict styles; (3) anger management; (4) conflict de-escalation; (5) win-win problem solving; (6) negotiation; (7) understanding others' perspectives; and (8) mediation.³⁶ The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) has been used extensively in U.S. schools. This well-evaluated K-8 program deals with character education as well as social and emotional understanding. It teaches participants to use appropriate skills to reduce violence and prejudice, form caring relationships, and build healthy lives. The program equips school personnel with needed skills and expertise to create school and classroom environments that are caring, safe, and respectful. The RCCP also incorporates extensive training and coaching to help teachers implement curriculum-based skill instruction, classroom management, and instructional practices. In addition, the

program recruits, trains, and supervises students who can act as peer mediators, enabling them to facilitate conflict resolution among fellow students.³⁷

An anger-management group is another way to help adolescents deal with anger. This form of intervention helps them control their reactions to stressful situations.³⁸ Adolescents thus gain greater insight into the factors that trigger their anger and acquire tools that will help them express their feelings in more appropriate ways.

Due to the complexities involved in understanding the etiology and dynamics of anger, only professionally trained practitioners, such as school counselors and behavioral intervention specialists, should be involved in anger management. Schools without clinically qualified practitioners may be able to obtain such services through the local public schools. If this is not possible, schools can arrange for their teachers to receive behavior prevention and management training, which will increase their skills in (1) teaching and rewarding appropriate behaviors; (2) integrating social skills instruction throughout the curriculum; and (3) building academic enrichment programs that ensure that students master key knowledge and skills.³⁹

The success of these initiatives depends to a significant extent on parental support. Even if schools can improve students' conduct while they are in school—and the evidence shows that they can indeed do that—the likelihood of achieving a lasting impact on the child's character is diminished if the school's values aren't supported at home.

The school principal plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the school climate conveys a sense of order and community as well as high expectations for student behavior. School administrators must clearly understand what it takes to foster high levels of appropriate behavior, rather than merely developing lists of detailed rules to deal with misbehavior.⁴⁰

Anger Management Resources for Teachers

1. **School Psychology (*Anger Strategies for Students: Resources for Parents, Teachers and Psychologists*):** <http://www.future.schoolpsychology.org/anger-management-strategies-students>

2. **LEARNet (*Anger and Anger Management: Resources for Parents, Teachers, Clinicians, & Students*):** http://www.projectlearn.net.org/tutorials/anger_management.3.html

3. **Internet4Classrooms (*Character Education Resources*):**
• http://www.internet4classrooms.com/character_ed.htm
• <http://www.goodcharacter.com/TeacherResources.html>

4. **Regional K-12 Student Mental Health Initiative (*Anger Management Resources*):** <http://www.regionalk12smhi.org/programs.cfm?topic=ANGER>

5. "Connecting Children With God Through Prayer and Worship" by Donna J. Habenicht and Larry Burton in *The Journal of Adventist Education* (October/November 2004): <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200467010506.pdf>

6. "Adventist Schools Do Make a Difference!" by V. Bailey Gillespie in *ibid.* (October/November 2002): <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200265011205.pdf>

7. "Equipping Teachers to Spiritually Nurture Children From a Biblical Perspective" by John Dekle: <http://www.timdekle.com/download/dissertation/et.pdf>

Spiritual Nurturing


God has given a mandate to Christian teachers, administrators, parents, and church members to nurture students' spirituality, which includes helping those who are struggling with anger issues. These stakeholders should provide students with needed tools to develop and experience their faith in a meaningful way as they obtain a deepening understanding of the kingdom of God, encouraging them to embrace a lifestyle of unswerving obedience to the teachings of Scripture.

To accomplish this goal, Christian teachers can infuse their instructional approaches and anger-management strategies with parables and object lessons that focus on character-building virtues such as peacemaking, respect, kindness, courage, tolerance, and love. Through narratives and personal experiences, teachers can lead students to discover the power of prayer, and to follow the example of Jesus, who spent hours in prayer in order to receive wis-

dom and power. Teachers have a sacred obligation to assure students that they can commune with God about everything that is important to them: their joys, sorrows, anger issues, successes, and failures.

An important part of the Christian educator's spiritual, ethical, and moral responsibility is teaching students self-discipline, self-control, and self-reliance.⁴¹ In order to do this, they should provide students with opportunities and experiences that strengthen their connection with a higher power—Jesus, the Master Teacher and Peacemaker, who will give them wisdom to deal appropriately with anger and other destructive impulses.

The Christian teacher's responsibility to reach out to students who are struggling with behavioral problems and to connect them with divine power is supported by the fundamental truth

that “only the love that flows from the heart of Christ can heal. Only He, in whom that love flows, even as the sap in the tree or the blood in the body, can rescue the wounded soul.”⁴² 

This article has been peer reviewed.



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