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ABSTRACT

A survey was developed to study anger in elementary school students drawing on the experience of school counselors and teachers. The final survey was distributed to elementary school counselors, school administrators, and teachers to use with children referred for anger control issues. In 7 elementary schools, 1 female and 36 male students in kindergarten through grade 5 were interviewed. Most of these children had not been identified as having any learning difficulties, and most were not being given any type of medication to control behavior. Periods of time when children were allowed to interact socially were catalysts for runaway emotions. Children did not appear to be reacting to academic stressors, and there appeared to be as many different reasons for the anger as there were children. Twenty of the 37 did not believe that the teacher disliked them. The role of diet was not clear, but most students reported having eaten a fast-food type breakfast high in fat and sugar. The relationship between males and aggressiveness was readily apparent, as all but one of the referred students were male. Implications for elementary school counselors and teachers are discussed. Since most students referred had not been identified as having problems in spite of a history of chronic anger, schools should consider ways to meet the needs of these students. (SLD)

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A Study of Anger and the Elementary Student.  
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## A STUDY OF ANGER AND THE ELEMENTARY STUDENT

The story Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day is well-loved and well-understood by elementary children. Unfortunately, some children relate to the story on a daily basis. As elementary school counselors, we are seeing more and more that children's emotions and their difficulty regulating them are playing a significant role in interfering with successful social, behavioral and academic situations. Specifically, anger has surfaced at an increasing rate.

Anger is one of the most common and powerful emotions experienced by children. Anger is often the culprit behind difficulties children have expressing feelings and controlling their impulses. For this reason there are a myriad of anger control strategies and programs for children. We teach anger control strategies in the classroom, in small groups and on an individual basis. We help children to understand the various constructive ways to express anger and the consequences of expressing anger in both appropriate and inappropriate ways.

But still, students continue to let their anger get control of them instead of controlling their anger. Is anger a mask for other feelings and situations we are unaware of? Is poor impulse control or poor frustration tolerance an inherited predisposition? Is anger a compensation for academic and/or social deficits? Are the strategies we are teaching a waste of time? Are there better ways to help angry children?

With such an astounding list of difficult questions we began our research project. The purpose of our study was to explore the various instances in which children lost control of their anger and to get a first-hand account of their perceptions of their situations. With this information, we hoped to have a better understanding of children's anger and thereby, a better understanding of how to help our students succeed in school.

### Data Collection and Procedures

Data for our research was collected through a survey distributed to school counselors, administrators and classroom teachers. Survey questions were developed by careful consideration of factors, which we determined

would most likely have an influence on a child's emotions. It was decided that home environment and any disruptions therein would impact the child's feelings about himself and his school day. It also was of interest to know whether medication or time of day played a role in anger.

These three questions were asked along with an inquiry as to whether anger outbursts appeared to be an isolated incident or were a part of a history of loss of control.

Students were asked what was the precipitating factor in their anger, as well as what attempts were made to control their emotions. We also surveyed television viewing habits and typical breakfast diets.

An initial draft of the survey was given to 13 elementary counselors in our county schools. Helpful feedback brought about an addition of questions concerning whether or not a student had an IEP (individualized education plan) or an SEP (student education plan) and whether or not the student perceived that his teacher liked him. Students also were asked what their class was doing when they became angry and how they are doing in their academic work.

The final survey again was distributed to the elementary counselors, as well as school administrators and teachers, for their use with children who were referred to them for anger control issues. Teachers and administrators were asked to send children who were having anger outbursts directly to the counselor or designated interviewer before punitive intervention. It was felt that by doing this, more accurate information could be obtained as to the children's true feelings, opposed to what they felt they should be saying in repentance.

When an angry child was sent to an interviewer, he was asked the survey questions. Since there were a number of interviewers, the method of administration was not controlled. However, it generally was assumed that the questions were asked orally and that empathy and concern for the child's feelings were displayed. The survey was given in a private setting, away from other children and away from the setting in which the child originally became angry. The children were followed up at a later date for further feelings assessment. These later counseling sessions were not included in this survey.

After all surveys were collected, responses were tallied for each question and an attempt was made to find recurring elements which would indicate a causative factor of anger in children. Once these factors were identified, it was hoped that intervention strategies that could head off loss of anger control could be employed in future counseling sessions.

### Survey Results

From the beginning of January to the middle of March, seven area elementary schools interviewed 36 males and one female for a total of 37 completed student interviews. Elementary school counselors conducted 29 of the interviews; elementary school administrators conducted seven of the interviews; and one elementary classroom teacher conducted an interview. Students ranged in age from six years to eleven years old, which placed them in kindergarten-5th grades. The following information was gleaned from the interviews:

Number of interviewees taking medication:

temporary (cold) medicine - 4  
medication for ADD/ADHD - 7  
no medication - 24  
unknown - 2

Number of interviewees with an IEP or SEP: 9

Number of interviewees with a chronic/recurring anger problem:  
chronic problem - 26  
not chronic problem - 10  
no response - 1

Time of day outburst occurred:

8:00—10:00am, 17 students  
10:00—Noon, 7 students  
Noon—end of school day, 12 students  
no indication, 1 student

Cause of anger: A variety of responses were given including teasing, too much work, not wanting to be at school, not wanting to do the work, and “messaging with stuff.”

Student’s school activity at the time of the anger outburst:  
structured (class work, planned activity) - 13 students  
unstructured (on bus, lunch, changing classes) - 22 students  
not classifiable - 2 students

Perceived anger control attempts: Students reported using a variety of attempts to control their anger before “blowing up.” Strategies included ignoring, counting to ten and asking the person to stop.

Feelings at the day’s beginning (before coming to school):  
mad/sad - 10 students, not mad - 27 students

Lack of sleep as a contributing factor to anger:

yes - 9, no - 27, unknown - 1

Television viewing: Student’s television viewing varied and ranged from movie videos including Lion King to the Nickelodeon channel, to regular television shows such as The Simpson’s, Cops/911 and Blood Sport.

Perceived situation at home as contributor to anger:

yes - 18, no - 19

Students’ reported diets: The majority of students ate breakfast and lunch. Most students reported eating packaged, quick foods for breakfast and school-prepared food for lunch.

Teacher’s feelings toward you, as perceived by the student:

mad/sad - 17, not mad - 9, unknown - 11

Students who could name a best subject or academic strength:

yes - 32, no - 5

Students who could name something they felt good about that day:

yes - 24 (things they felt good about mainly were positive interactions with friends and completion of school projects)  
no - 13

Students who felt they used an anger control strategy:

yes - 23, no - 14

Strategies included: ignore, walk away, tell the teacher, think/relax, count to 10, kick a ball, imagine things, put thoughts in writing, tell person to stop, breathe slowly, put head on desk.

Students who perceived control of situation enough to change it:

yes - 28, no - 9

What students wished for if king of the land: fairness/honesty, no drugs/alcohol, everyone behave/be nice, no teasing, stop violence/fighting, homes for the homeless, no parents, no school, less work, kids in charge and do anything they want, to be obeyed or else placed in a dungeon/cage

### Observations and Reflections

After careful analysis of the data, we determined that the overwhelming majority of children who showed a lack of anger control were males (36 out of 37) ranging in age from six to eleven years of age. Most of these children had not been identified as having learning difficulties and most were not being given any type of behavior controlling medication despite a high incidence of teachers reporting a history of behavioral outbursts.

Seventeen out of 37 incidents occurred before 10:00 a.m. This included the unstructured time the children were waiting for school to begin as well as the time spent on the bus in the morning. Twelve out of 37 incidents occurred after 12:00 p.m., which included the unstructured after-school time and the bus ride home. It was felt that periods of time when the children were not engaged in specific activities and were allowed to interact socially with one another were catalysts for runaway emotions in some children. Twenty-two out of 37 reported that they were in one of these non-activity time spans when they lost control. Although not asked on the survey, future counseling sessions with these students should focus on their perceived peer acceptance and overall security in the school setting.

Most students (27 out of 37) reported that they were not mad when they left home. Approximately 50 percent of respondents indicated that they had no specific problems at home which had caused them to be easily angered at school. The validity of this claim was questioned due to known facts about some students who were included in this number. Rather than make unfounded assumptions about why children would rather not implicate their families, this question was regarded as invalid in determining the results. Three-fourths of the children reported that they felt they had received adequate sleep at home the night before.

Despite a protracted history of chronic anger, 20 out of 37 children did not believe that their teacher disliked them. Nine of these 20 said their teacher did like them and 11 of these 20 indicated that they were unsure about their teachers' feelings. We wondered if the latter group was unsure because they would rather not admit their teachers' unhappiness with them. There appeared to be a general reluctance to acknowledge that their own actions could cause their teacher to see them in a negative light. The 17 who did indicate that their teacher was "sad or mad" may not be capable of assessing the overall teacher opinion apart from the immediate incident at hand. Perhaps a different wording of this question would elicit different responses.

The role of diet is unclear and could bear closer inspection. Most students reported having eaten a fast food type breakfast which was high in fat and sugar. This could be the basis for a whole new research project.

There was no one reason given for why the children became angry. There appeared to be as many different answers as there were children. Elementary-aged children typically are not able to identify esoteric motivations behind incidents. The only trend seen was to give very subjective and concrete observations of actions of others around them which caused their anger. No interviewee identified his role as causative to the incident.

## The Research

A review of the research revealed that investigations on emotion and social functioning in childhood are relatively scarce. Even the literature that was found stressed repeatedly that more attention needs to be given to the role of emotion in normative and non-normative social development. Although a seemingly unresolved problem, several key points were mentioned for consideration.

First, children's understanding of their own and others' emotions and their tendencies to express and regulate their emotions likely influence a variety of aspects of their social functioning. This includes effects on both peers and adults. There was even some support for the idea that having friends and engaging in successful social interaction with peers is related to the ability to regulate strong feelings effectively. In one particular study, aggressive children exhibited less sophisticated understanding of their own emotions than did less aggressive children. Rejected children, it seems, are more likely both to choose aggressive solutions to social problems and to evaluate prosocial solutions as being less effective than their average peers.

Several studies stressed the importance of anger coping programs that include both a self-control component and an understanding of emotions component. Aggressive children should be taught to recognize the behavioral, environmental and physiological cues of anger and to use strategies to control angry feelings. It also is important to teach children constructive ways of letting their peers know they are angry with them. An emphasis was placed on group interaction for coping with anger since children acquire emotional self-control as a result of the increasingly complex demands placed on them by peer interactions and social play.

Secondly, the parent-child relationship is a powerful context for understanding the ways in which emotions are expressed, socialized and regulated. Parental encouragement to control one's emotions has been correlated with children's self-monitoring behavior. A moderate amount of parental encouragement of children's expression of emotion has been associated with teachers' ratings of children's peer competence, friendliness and self-esteem. When encouragement of expression is paired with encouragement of active coping efforts children show constructive modes of coping with anger. In contrast, punitive reactions to minimize the child's feelings (and possibly minimize parental personal distress) resulted in the child venting emotion aggressively. Some studies also point to the fact that children from maritally distressed homes may have difficulty dealing with emotions. One showed that boys are more likely to be exposed to marital conflict than are girls.

Being exposed to violence/conflict through television and games/videos also negatively influences a child's emotional management.

Another important aspect of the research points to children's perceived control over a situation and how it relates to their coping with distressing stimuli. Studies showed that children viewed happiness as resulting from the attainment of a desired goal and anger as occurring when a desired goal is lost or not attained because of an uncontrollable obstacle. Studies related aggression to fear and anxiety as well as negative outcome expectancies due to prior failures. One suggested strategy for giving a child a sense of control was to teach the child self-regulation.

Lastly, temperament might predispose a child to aggressive tendencies. Temperament, in part, influences the learnability of social behaviors and social knowledge. It also influences the development of guilt and conscience, which influence the child's capacity for inhibitory control. Temperamental characteristics may lead us to construe our environments differently. When children's upper limit for stimulation is reached, they engage in activities to reduce the intensity of stimulation they experience from the other person or the situation. When the lower limit for stimulation (boredom) is reached, they will attempt to stimulate their environment. Because individual differences in temperament have consequences for how individuals perceive and react to their environments, these differences need to be considered when managing a learning environment and establishing child-rearing practices.

### Conclusion and Implications for Educators

From our research we concluded that our survey reached no clear-cut conclusions but did generate a lot of discussion. Our survey can serve as a basis for the development of a more systematic plan to help the angry child. What we were able to find were relationships. For example, most of the incidents (22 out of 37) occurred during unstructured time. From this we concluded that the students are not reacting to academic stressors. Instead we found a relationship between loss of control and unstructured peer interactions. Interestingly, this supports the research stated earlier which found that having friends and engaging in successful social interaction with peers is related to the ability to regulate strong feelings effectively.

We also found a relationship between males and aggressiveness. Specifically, 36 out of the 37 students referred for interviews due to loss of anger control were male. Could loss of anger control be a genetic pre-disposition or does society expect males to react differently to strong emotions?

Are boys more likely to employ an external locus of control when feeling overwhelmed? These questions relate to the research on temperament and its role in individual perception of and reaction to environment. Perhaps males simply have a more aggressive temperament. Their aggressive behavior could be a comfortable expression of a myriad of emotions ranging from sadness and hurt feelings to embarrassment, anger and even boredom. Our study seems to suggest these facts as well.

From our research we discovered that most (30 out of 37) of the students exhibiting aggressive behavior had not been identified as needing intervention services or behavior controlling medication despite the history of chronic angry. The school system should consider ways to address the needs of these children.

Specific implications for elementary school counselors include the following:

- 1) An exploration of a range of emotions and encouragement of expression of these emotions needs to be included in counseling sessions with aggressive children.
- 2) An assessment of the student's perceptions of peer acceptance and evaluation of their social skills needs to be included in counseling sessions with aggressive children.
- 3) A focus on attainment of anger control strategies needs to be included in counseling sessions with aggressive children.
- 4) Direct attention to the preservation of a positive social image while employing anger control strategies needs to be included in counseling sessions with aggressive children, particularly in work with aggressive boys.
- 5) Counselors need to become more instrumental in seeking referrals to child study teams for children with chronic anger problems.

Although our study is by no means conclusive, we feel that the implications of our results will greatly enhance our counseling methods with children in the elementary school setting. We hope further research on this topic will expand on some of our unanswered concerns.

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