

## FACT SHEET #3: Anger Management in Schools

May, 2008

Douglas C. Smith, Ph.D.

### BACKGROUND

- Anger is a multidimensional construct, which includes affective (e.g., emotional intensity), cognitive (e.g., hostile attitudes) and behavioral (e.g., aggression) components. Because the *experience* of anger is essentially a personal phenomenon, its assessment relies mainly on self-report. In contrast, anger *expression* may be assessed by observations, teacher and parent ratings, and other behavioral indices.
- Frequent and intense anger is considered one of the key predictors of violence potential at school.
- School-based anger management interventions have proliferated in recent years and encompass a wide range of treatment strategies. Comprehensive intervention packages often include modules on stress reduction and coping; psycho-educational approaches such as learning about the physiology of anger, anger triggers, etc.; cognitive restructuring including learning alternative ways to interpret the actions and intentions of others; and behavioral skills training such as assertiveness training.
- School wide efforts to prevent anger related problems assist all students in identifying and managing angry feelings, challenging anger provoking beliefs and attitudes, and learning alternatives to aggression as a means of expressing anger.

### KEY ISSUES

- Although anger is considered a fundamental and universal human emotion, there are individual differences both in the disposition to experience anger and in the self-regulation of anger.
- Frequent, intense anger arousal impairs decision making and impulse control, leading to aggressive behavior.
- Both outward expressions of anger through destructive behavior and inward suppression of anger may constitute anger “problems” at school. These correspond roughly to “externalizing” and “internalizing” problems of youth. In the case of anger suppression, symptoms may manifest as anxiety and/or depression.
- Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, effective anger management programs target specific anger-related problems including chronically high levels of angry feelings, hostile attitudes toward others, and the tendency to express anger in destructive and/or hurtful ways.

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

- Chronically high levels of anger and hostility constitute risk factors for health concerns, interpersonal difficulties, and violent and aggressive behavior. As a general intervention approach, anger management programs delivered in school settings have proven effective in reducing the extent of angry feelings experienced at school as well as negative expression of these feelings through destructive and aggressive behaviors.
- Although both males and females *experience* anger to the same extent, females tend to *express* anger in less direct ways, e.g., interpersonal or relational aggression. Given the indirect nature of their anger expression, females are less likely to be referred for anger management programs in school.
- The vast majority of anger management interventions in school settings target males and secondary level students. There is a clear need for developing strategies appropriate for younger students and those representing more diverse cultural and ethnic groups.
- The most effective interventions employ cognitive-behavioral techniques including anger regulation and control, problem solving to learn alternatives to aggression as an expression of anger, and cognitive restructuring to change maladaptive thought processes.
- Effective school wide programs for anger management focus on preventing anger-related problems by creating a climate of nurturance and respect and allowing students the opportunity to process angry feelings and learn alternative strategies for anger expression. Anger management skills are taught in the context of everyday classroom experiences.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider that effective anger regulation and control in school settings involves primary prevention strategies (i.e., teaching emotional literacy as part of the curriculum) as well as more targeted interventions for those students manifesting anger-related problems at school.
- Utilize cognitive-behavioral techniques that include problem solving and impulse control training since these have the most empirical support for effective anger management with children and youth.
- Recognize that accurate assessment data is needed to match anger management skills training with the specific needs of students referred for such programs.
- Be aware that anger management training at school should be delivered early in the developmental trajectory and should be tailored to the needs of a diverse population of students.
- Recognize the unique needs of female students and students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds when considering anger management interventions at school.
- Provide skill instruction to students on identifying and understanding angry affect, challenging attitudes and beliefs about the intentions of others, and that increases options for resolving interpersonal conflicts in nonviolent ways.
- Provide frequent opportunities for practicing newly acquired anger management skills in the context of the classroom or on the playground. Look for “teachable moments” when young people can learn to recognize anger triggers and assess how their responses to it either increased or decreased the likelihood of future conflict.

## CAUTIONS

- Avoid the use of a “one size fits all” anger management intervention strategy. Instead, recognize that anger-related problems at school may manifest themselves in vastly different ways including both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Effective prevention and intervention requires appropriate assessment and matching of treatment to individual needs.
- Be aware that not all available anger management curriculums are “evidence-based”. Look for programs whose key components have received empirical support.
- Don’t overlook the anger management needs of females and others who tend to express anger in less direct ways than physical aggression. Rumors, snide comments, and social rejection can cause substantial psychological pain.
- Recognize that students need opportunities to practice and refine anger management skills in a “real world” environment. Consider anger provoking incidents and reactions at school as opportunities to apply trained skills.
- Recognize that, although often related, anger and aggression are not one and the same. High levels of anger can exist without aggressive expression and sometimes aggressive behavior does not involve angry affect.

## RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.hamfish.org/cms/view/160](http://www.hamfish.org/cms/view/160) – Hamilton Fish Institute

[www.ucsb.edu/csbyd](http://www.ucsb.edu/csbyd) – Univ. of California, Santa Barbara, Center for School-Based Youth Development

Larson, J., & Lochman, J.E. (2005). *Helping schoolchildren cope with anger: A cognitive-behavior intervention*. New York: Guilford Press.

Smith, D.C., Larson, J., & Nuckles, D.R. (2006). Youth anger management treatments for school violence prevention. In S.R. Jimerson & M.J. Furlong (Eds.), *The handbook of school violence and school safety: From research to practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

The Consortium to Prevent School Violence (CPSV) is non-profit group of researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who are focused on advocacy that promotes effective implementation of positive school violence prevention practices, and fostering technical assistance, information dissemination, and professional development based on high-quality scientific research. CPSV promotes open access where stakeholders in schools and surrounding communities are an integral part of the Consortium’s work.