

Anger in Middle School: The Solving Problems Together Model

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Abstract

Problem-focused interventions are considered to be one of the most effective group counseling strategies with adolescents. This article describes a problem-focused group counseling model, Solving Problems Together (SPT), with a small group of adolescent African American boys struggling with anger management. Adapted from the teaching philosophy of problem-based learning, SPT provides students with the opportunity to work toward positive solutions for managing their anger, while simultaneously helping them to increase their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Disciplinary referrals related to anger and violent behavior decreased significantly after completion of the group experience.

Keywords: group counseling, solving problems together, problem-based learning, anger management, African American males

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Educators and mental health professionals in secondary schools are presented with the arduous challenge of managing behavioral problems in the classroom, particularly those associated with overactive, disruptive, and aggressive behaviors (US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Students who demonstrate a persistent pattern of these behaviors are at a greater risk for many negative outcomes including adult criminality for both violent and nonviolent offending (Broidy et al., 2003; Farrington, 1994; Fergusson & Horwood, 1995; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999). Anger related violence, in particular, is of utmost concern for youth at risk (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). School counselors can play a vital role in helping students manage anger and aggressive behaviors so that they can become successful. This article describes a group counseling model that can help decrease student office referrals by helping students discover strategies for positively managing their anger.

Anger and Violent Behavior

Most definitions of anger are based on negative outcomes; however, McCarthy (1998) defines anger as an appropriate, natural, healthy emotion. Even though anger can be very intense, the feeling of anger is normal. The way that anger is expressed, however, foreshadows a positive or negative outcome.

While anger is an emotion and not a behavior, it can lead to violent or physically aggressive behaviors. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008) reported 36% of ninth through twelfth grade students had been in a physical fight within the last twelve months. Additionally, 32% of violent crimes including rape, sexual assault,

robbery, and aggravated assault against youth aged 12-18 occurred during school or on the way to and from (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, & Gurn, 2006). Adolescent males tend to express their anger in more overt ways, often resulting in hostile reactions (Burney, 2006; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olweus, 1979; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, Welsh, & Fox, 1995). Forms of anger expressions often include use of weapons, threats, fighting, and gang related vandalism. Adolescent males often view anger as a tool to assert their masculinity or control over a victim or the environment (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

Researchers have also reported increased levels of anger and violence among racial minority groups (Hill, Soriano, & Chen, 1994). African American males may use anger in different ways to respond to the psychological effects of provocation (Gibbs, 1993; Stevenson, 2002; Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002). While some African American male students tend to suppress their anger to cope with social challenges (Johnson & Greene, 1991; Stevenson, 2002), others may alter their speech, behavior, or appearance to appear nonthreatening in order to gain social acceptance (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Steward et al., 1998). For example, a student may use humor or speak softly when angered. Others, however, may engage in more overt expressions of anger, such as hypermasculinity (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Spencer, 1999; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). This behavior creates the impression of toughness or noncompliance, but the adolescent may not necessarily demonstrate aggressive attitudes or insubordinate behaviors (Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003). For example, a student may “act cool” or demonstrate “blustering” behavior, but the adolescent still remains non-aggressive and compliant. In contrast, hypermasculine behaviors may also take the form of more direct aggressive behaviors (Noguera, 2003;

Stevenson et al., 2002). Researchers have demonstrated that hypermasculine behaviors can lead to negative teacher perceptions of student academic abilities and behavioral functioning, which can lead to increased disciplinary referrals and special education recommendations (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Spencer, 1999; Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009). Therefore, African American adolescent males who express their anger verbally or physically are vulnerable (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005).

Even if anger does not lead to extreme violence, the inappropriate expression of anger, through verbal abuse, or intimidating or threatening behavior, can have negative consequences. These consequences may include losing friendships and feeling guilt, shame, or regret (Reilly & Shopshire, 2002). According to Lines (2007), teaching anger management to students includes identifying the triggers of their anger and controlling the outbursts. If students can learn more positive strategies for managing their anger, then perhaps schools will see less violent behavior and have less of a need for adult management.

Solving Problems Together

According to the American School Counselor Association (2006), small group counseling services are an essential component of a comprehensive school counseling program. In addition to being efficient in addressing developmental concerns of students, group counseling provides students with an opportunity to share personal experiences and provide support to each other (Schmidt, 2004). Students begin to understand that they are not the only ones with the particular problem and begin to connect with each other (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In a school setting, problem-focused

interventions are one of the most effective group counseling interventions for children (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007).

One strategy for teaching anger management is the use of the group counseling model, Solving Problems Together (SPT). Initially studied by Hall in 2004, the SPT model provides students with the opportunity to work toward positive solutions for managing their anger, while simultaneously helping them to increase their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Hall 2004, 2006a, 2006b). Adapted from the teaching philosophy of problem-based learning (Barrows, 2000; Neufield & Barrows, 1974; Schmidt, 1993), SPT encourages students to work together to uncover solutions to problems. This model encourages students to critically analyze information that is presented in a problem scenario, acquire new knowledge, and then apply that knowledge to the real world (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Bruner, 1990; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Schunk, 2000).

PBL emphasizes responsibility and encourages independent learning, which is a skill that fosters student development and can be used for a life-time (Pross, 2006). Students who participate in PBL groups report more encouragement, less stress, and more satisfaction in their learning environment (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Vernon & Blake, 1993). Long-term recall is also improved in PBL groups, and students report studying more for understanding and meaning, utilizing the library for research, and using a broader variety of resources (Albanese & Mitchell; Vernon & Blake).

During an SPT group, students are presented with a problem statement that reflects their current issue (e.g., anger management). The students first identify the facts in the problem or what they know, develop open-ended questions related to the

fact, hypothesize possible answers to those questions, develop key learning issues, and determine resources. Next, students research the learning issues independently and discuss their findings amongst each other. Students then formulate solutions to the problem based on their research and discussions. Finally, students practice and apply the skills that they discovered through their investigations (Hall 2004, 2006a, 2006b).

Application of SPT with Anger Management

After receiving several referrals and working in small groups with children experiencing anger management struggles, Rachel, a school counselor in a small, rural middle school in the southern United States contacted Dr. Hall, her professor and supervisor in the school counseling educational specialist's program, to seek additional resources for helping these students. After discussing the students and their struggles, Dr. Hall met with graduate research assistant, Jeri Lynn, to research and discuss possible group counseling strategies. After reviewing the literature, the group decided that SPT appeared to be a good strategy to try.

Five African American male students, ranging from ages 12 to 15, participated in the group. One student was in the 6th grade, two were in the 7th grade, and two were in the 8th grade. All five students had been referred to the principal's office for aggressive behaviors multiple times. The school educates approximately 650 students in grades six through eight. Fifty-two percent (52%) of students are female, while the remaining 48% are male. The school is predominately white (62%) with 36% of the student population being African American, 1% being Hispanic, and 1% being Asian. The SPT group counseling model focused on these students discover appropriate anger management strategies in an effort to decrease their office referrals related to aggressive behaviors.

In SPT, designing the problem statement is a critical factor in the success of the group. After interviewing teachers and speaking with the students about their anger management concerns, the group (Rachel, Dr. Hall, and Jeri Lynn) developed the following problem statement:

David has been getting into a lot of trouble lately. He's just so mad and people will not leave him alone. He's got to figure out a way to control his temper before he gets into even more trouble.

This problem statement reflected the behaviors and thoughts of the students in the group. Writing a problem statement that is concise and describes the group members is vital.

Session 1

During the first session, the counselor discussed the fact that all of the students were chosen for the group based on their number of disciplinary referrals and their struggles with anger management. She then asked them if they would be willing to help her develop a plan to help other students who also struggle with the same issue. Once the group members agreed to this, she then presented the problem scenario of David and asked if this scenario was similar to their own struggles. Next, the counselor asked them to discuss what they knew about the scenario. She then recorded the facts onto a large sheet of bulletin board paper so that all group members could clearly see the facts of the scenario. During this time, the counselor also helped students to determine the difference between facts and assumptions. This helped the group to focus on factual information related to the situation and not what they assumed about the situation. The counselor finally highlighted the point that when students are faced with any problem, it

is crucial for them to focus on what they know and not on what they assume. She then summarized the session.

Session 2

After the facts from the problem statement were identified, the counselor asked group members to develop quality questions related to each of the facts. These questions had to begin with the words 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'why', and 'how'. For example, if students identified "David has been getting into trouble lately" as a fact, then a question could be "What has David been doing to get into trouble?" The students continued listing approximately 2-3 questions per fact, on the bulletin board paper, until all the facts were addressed. The counselor then summarized the group session by discussing the importance of asking good questions to find quality solutions.

Sessions 3 & 4

Once questions were developed, the counselor then asked students to discuss possible answers to each of the questions. During this time, the counselor heavily focused on students' experiences with their own anger and inappropriate behavior. By allowing two sessions to discuss hypotheses, students were able to reflect on the problem statement, how the problem related to their lives, and the impact of their own inappropriate responses to anger. Group members also began brainstorming possible solutions to not only the problem statement but also to their own anger management struggles.

Session 5

Once students had developed possible hypotheses based on their own experiences for each of the questions, the counselor asked them to work together to

narrow down the list of questions to 2 or 3 key questions. These key questions were considered to be the most crucial questions that students needed to answer in order to assist David in the problem statement. Students narrowed down their list of questions to the following: 1) What are my anger triggers? 2) How can I control my anger? and 3) What else can I do when I get angry? The counselor then asked the students to identify possible resources for finding possible solutions to these questions. Students identified various people (counselor, teacher, youth leader, etc.) and the Internet. The counselor then revealed several books related to anger and asked the students if the books could possibly contain answers. After students skimmed the books, they then acknowledged the books as a possible resource. This session helped students to begin considering that answers are all around us, we just have to know where to look. The counselor then asked the group members to discover the answers to the first two questions by interviewing one person and reading one item (book or Internet article) before the next group meeting.

Session 6

When students returned to group, the counselor wrote all of their discovered answers on the bulletin board paper. Every response was written, even if the counselor thought it was a not necessarily the best answer. For example, one student reported back that his father suggested that he should hit the student that was making him angry. The father's justification was that the student would then quit making his son angry. The counselor acknowledged this as a possible solution and wrote the answer on the bulletin board paper. However, after all of the responses had been written, she then asked the group to discuss consequences for each of the solutions that they had given.

The group then ranked each solution according to the consequence. The hitting response was still a possible solution, but it ended up being the last option listed. This process encouraged students to explore all of their options before making a final decision concerning an appropriate action. Next, the counselor helped students practice particular skills that they identified through their research. For example, students in this particular group identified taking deep breaths as one of their anger management strategies. So the counselor encouraged each group to practice taking deep breaths. Another positive skill that students identified was walking away. Therefore, the counselor provided role play scenarios in order to promote the students' practice of walking away. At the conclusion of this session, the counselor asked students to interview one person and read one item to answer the third key question which was "What else can I do when I get angry?"

Session 7

During the seventh session, students reported back their findings and again the counselor wrote all responses on the bulletin board paper. Once students discussed their findings, the counselor encouraged them to practice the skills through role play scenarios.

Session 8

During the final session, students designed and decorated an anger management bulletin board next to the counselor's office. This project helped the students to summarize all of the skills and strategies that they learned through group counseling and gave them a sense of pride and accomplishment for what they had

achieved. The bulletin board also served as an outreach tool by promoting the use of positive anger management strategies for other students throughout the school.

Effectiveness of SPT with Anger Management

To evaluate the effectiveness of the SPT Anger Management group, the counselor designed and administered a pretest/posttest instrument. The questions on the instrument were specific to the group's goals and included questions such as "List your anger triggers;" "Describe strategies for managing your anger;" and "Describe what you liked most about this group." Student responses indicated that they did indeed learn specific triggers and strategies for managing their anger. On the pretest, students could only describe general events that led to their anger. For example, one student wrote "annoying people", while another wrote "school." However, on the posttest, students were able to list specific triggers, such as "teacher not calling on me when I have a question and raise my hand", "father when he's yelling at me for nothing", and "students when they are picking on me." In fact, all five students identified at least 3 anger triggers each on the posttest, and all could accurately describe at least 4 strategies for managing their anger. Students were unable to list any positive anger management strategies on the posttest; answers included "hit the person making me angry", "yelling at the person to get it out", and others left the question blank. However, on the posttest, students indicated positive answers such as "squeezing and relaxing my hand until I calm down", "taking some deep breaths and walking away", and "telling the person that I need a minute to calm down and walking away". Students also indicated that they really enjoyed the group format. In addition, they reported that they enjoyed the group

discussions, felt like they were in control of what we talked about, and believed that the problem statement really applied to them.

The counselor was initially concerned that students would not complete their out of group assignments, but all students exceeded the counselor's expectations by reading more than one item and interviewing more than one person. The students seemed to really identify with the problem statement and made comments about how they enjoyed the readings. As one student said, "It wasn't like having to read for class. I really wanted to know the answer to the question, and that book had it."

The counselor also reviewed students' disciplinary referrals to determine if the group had an impact on their behavior. Prior to the group intervention, each member averaged between two and three monthly disciplinary referrals for violent behavior. After the group ended, not a single group member was referred to the office for the rest of the year (4 months) for a violent offense. Given these observations, the counselor highly recommends the use of SPT as a group counseling model for anger management with youth.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the counselor found the above results to be very exciting, the SPT intervention described in this article only included a few African American males within a particular age range; generalization to other groups is cautioned. To determine if specific interventions are effective across groups, counselors must rely on replications across groups. While SPT has been examined in other small groups and found to display similar results (see Hall 2004, 2006a, 2006b), studies are still minimal. Further research could be conducted with larger groups of students as well as with various

group counseling topics (i.e., social skills, peer relationships, academic success, etc.) to determine if the SPT model generates statistically significant differences in student behavior and knowledge. In addition, further research could also examine the effectiveness of SPT among different age levels and/or counseling settings. The pretest/posttest design was also developed by the counselor and was not a standardized instrument. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of SPT through the use of standardized instruments to increase the validity and reliability of the model.

Conclusion

Students who consistently display inappropriate anger management strategies often struggle to succeed academically due to the amount of time spent in the principal's office or suspended from school. Professional school counselors can play a vital role in helping these students succeed by teaching them appropriate anger management strategies and implementing them inside the classroom. Through small group counseling, the school counselor can help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to positively manage their anger. Using SPT can help students to identify their own strategies as well as introduce them to numerous resources available to them. Students become engaged in the discovery of knowledge and skills related to anger management and empowered to learn techniques to help them become lifelong learners along the way.

Many school counselors use group counseling as an efficient way to reach many students. SPT promotes positive peer relationships, interactions, and communication among group members as they work together to solve problems. The SPT model can

also help counselors to reinforce academic concepts that align the school's mission by teaching problem solving and critical thinking skills. This model allows the counselor to focus on academic, career, and personal/social needs as well as reinforce the academic mission of the school.

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