Anger and aggression at school

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Angry and aggressive children

When were you last really angry? – not just annoyed, irritated, or a little frustrated but angry. Anger is the most extreme of our emotions. It can drive us to meet what we believe is our ‘fight for justice’; it can also drive us to do and say hurtful, destructive, things; even to those we love. Understanding and managing our own anger (as adults) is an important pre-requisite for helping children understand their own frustration, anger and aggression. If we find it hard – at times – how hard must it be for them?

The angry face – anger is not a ‘bad’ emotion

In children’s picture and activity books addressing feelings, you will often see a series of illustrations (or photos) of faces with a variety of facial expressions (as in emoji’s). The caption usually reads something like: ‘What are these people feeling?’ Amongst those faces children will see ‘the happy face’, ‘the anxious face’, ‘the sad face’, and ‘the angry face’. Children are pretty good at recognizing all the faces – including what an ‘angry face’ looks like – but sometimes they are not always adept at knowing when they feel angry (or why?); or understanding why someone else is angry. Children need to learn about the feelings associated with frustration and anger and this is where teachers can be constructive and supportive.

Children need to know that anger itself is not a bad emotion. Happy and sad feelings can often appear to be somewhat ‘black’ and ‘white’ to young children and adolescents (even some adults), but anger is a difficult feeling to categorise for children. They need to understand that they are not ‘bad’ for having these feelings. Being angry and showing anger is not – in itself – bad. It is the way we behave when we’re angry that really matters. Children need the chance (as we all do) to vent their feelings and share them in helpful, safe and reasonable ways.

The ‘range’ of emotional arousal ...

Children also need to learn the difference between concern, irritation, annoyance and frustration and ANGER. Of course frustration has degrees of significance in its perception
and frustration-tolerance is a crucial social/relational feature of our development. Children need to learn (as we all do) that life will not always be ‘happy’, ‘easy’, ‘fun’, ‘OK’ ... While resilience behaviour is not the topic of these notes, the ability to tolerate, and deal constructively with frustration is a crucial feature of resilience behaviour.

They also need to learn that aggression is different from the emotion of anger. Children need the opportunity to say what it is that makes them angry and why. This needs to be taught – especially to boys. Some angry actions or angry behaviour are inappropriate, some are clearly unacceptable and wrong; children need to learn this.

It also helps children if we teach them what happens in, and to, their bodies – and their thinking – when the emotion of frustration-anger comes. Our heart rate changes, we tense up in face, brow, shoulders, neck, stomach, we breathe more shallowly/rapidly ... When frustration/anger is ‘intense’ the fight/flight response may well be a common expression in the way children deal with the emotions associated with frustration and anger.

In counselling a child with anger issues we often use drawings to illustrate, discuss and explore the fundamental physiology of anger arousal. This awareness will always help in anger-management support. (See Rogers and McPherson, 2014).

Anger – as an emotion – is neither good nor bad.

As noted, it is very important that we do not convey to children that they are bad because (or when) they get angry. Difficult as it is, we need to help children understand the difference between angry feelings and angry behaviour. As adults, we can’t help ‘getting’ annoyed and very frustrated or angry at times (although some children and adults do have ‘low-frustration-tolerance’); we can learn to behave more constructively when we’re frustrated and angry.

Some children have learned that hostile and aggressive expressions of feelings of frustration are ‘acceptable’, or can get their immediate needs met. They see it in non-school settings, on TV, in sport, sometimes in their home. Angry behaviour is learned.

When a child behaves with aggressive anger

While a teacher should always be empathetic about the difficult, and dysfunctional, circumstances (from home) that predispose some students’ behaviour, we should never
tolerate – or play down – lashing out by biting, spitting, kicking; screaming, yelling, abusive swearing; punching; or throwing objects ...

When a child ‘stabs’ another on the arm with a pencil, or threatens another with scissors, or purposefully pushes, or trips, or punches because they don’t like – or are frustrated by a classroom peer (or teacher) – we should quickly, firmly and assertively address such behaviour. Eg: “No / Stop ( ... ). We do not bite. Ever.”, “Stop ... biting is NOT OK”. Eg :- When we remove scissors from a child, (where they are using them threateningly) we don’t ask them to hand them to us (when the child is visibly angry with a pair of scissors or pencil, or ...!). Direct them, firmly and calmly, to ‘put them down – now’; then pursue the calm use of time-out (see McPherson and Rogers, 2014). It needs to be communicated to the individual that such behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The ‘audience of peers’ needs to hear, and see, adult protective leadership regarding any such behaviours.

All children have a right to feel safe (emotionally and physically safe) at school.

At infant and early years level we need to show a brief, firm, disapproval of hostile and aggressive behaviour and we may need to direct the offending child to time-out. “We never poke people here Sean (focus specifically on the behaviour)”. If the child protests “But he took my pencil (or …)” we avoid arguing or taking sides. If necessary direct the child to work at another place in the room, or for more aggressive behaviours we will direct the child (or children) to take organised cool-off time (time-out).

Time-out (cool-off-time)

Cool-off time is often essential for very frustrated or angry children particularly when it is affecting other children’s safety. It is pointless trying to get to ‘the reasons’ for their hostile or aggressive – angry – behaviour in the heat of the moment. And, when ‘losing it’ – it is pointless trying to reason with the child ... Cool-off time should be exercised calmly, respectfully, firmly, decisively (in-class cool-off time or exit from the class time-out if necessary). It is crucial to have a whole-school plan for any use of ‘time-out’ (Rogers, 2011 and McPherson and Rogers, 2014).

Working in a grade Prep (recently) as a mentor-teacher (team-teaching for behaviour leadership) a five year old boy who has significant temper/anger issues said to me, in a
one-to-one chat that he could ‘fake a melt-down’ (sic)! “I can fake a melt-down and I have real melt-downs too when I don’t want to do something I don’t like ...” This was a very bright 5 year old lad (with family issues ... single parent / some domestic violence issues, a controlling father ...). On several occasions he had stood in the classroom – in front of other children – displaying loud temper tantrums. At one point he had stood in the middle of the classroom, after kicking over his chair, screaming at me, “I’m not listening to you!! I hate you!! You can’t tell me what to do!!” (He’d also displayed this ‘self wind-up’/’melt-down’ behaviour with his regular teacher too – the teacher I was mentoring).

On these occasions my colleague would calmly, firmly, respectfully and decisively escort him to in-class cool-off-time (time-out). If a student refuses to go to in-class cool-off-time [sitting away from all others in the classroom for five minutes or so], or starts yelling, kicking, throwing things in the in-class cool-off-time, a senior teacher is called for who will calmly, firmly, respectfully and decisively escort the child from the classroom to a supervised time-out place (normally for the rest of that class period).

There are occasions when a child will not leave the class even for a senior teacher (a deputy or principal ...). We cannot let a 5 year old (any child) hold the class – effectively – to ransom by a melt-down; a real loss of self-control or, as Jayden had told me, even a fake melt-down (!). On these occasions (rare) the senior teacher will stay with the child in the classroom and the class teacher calmly, respectfully, escorts the class away from the classroom. This approach to time-out addresses the nature, and effect, of peer audience and not easily reinforcing the child’s attentional/power-seeking behaviour. If we cannot calmly escort the child from his audience we will escort his audience away from him. It is crucial – in this approach - not to humiliate the child we leave in the supervised care of the senior colleague at this point. We are conveying to all the students that we will not let any one person in our class/school take away our right to feel safe here or to learn here (with screaming, threatening, hurtful behaviours ...).

The teacher and I also worked with Jayden on a personal behaviour plan to teach him frustration recognition, frustration tolerance and self-coping/calming skills (see the example later p 9).

Children, like Jayden, know where their behaviour is wrong; they also need to know that if they continue to create significant disruption to others’ learning or safety or fair treatment they will have to face time-out. Time-out is a necessary behaviour consequence.
Exercised with dignity and respect it sends a message to all children (not just the ‘tantrumming’ student) that teachers will lead for and maintain a safe classroom (psychologically as well as physically).

Time-out, however, cannot – by itself – teach the alternative behaviours that some children will need to learn to understand and manage their emotions. This is where behaviour support plans come in (Rogers, 2003; Rogers, 2009; Rogers and McPherson, 2014).

**Longer-term support**

Our aims for any longer-term behaviour support should include teaching children to:

- recognise the situations or circumstances that lower their tolerance to frustration;
- understand and be aware of their feelings and emotions;
- learning to ‘tune into’ their body when frustration comes ...;
- learn to communicate how intensely they feel (without resorting to verbal or physical aggression);
- learn a ‘vocabulary of emotion’ (Rogers, 2003 and McPherson and Rogers, 2014) to ‘label their feelings’ and express and communicate how much they feel about a given situation, circumstance or relationship (eg: annoyed, upset, irritated a little bit frustrated, very frustrated, angry ...);
- learn self-calming skills (see later);
- learn strategies, and skills, to manage their own anger or cope with others’ anger.

**Communicating with a child when they are frustrated**

It is important to calmly and briefly tune-in to a child’s feelings when they are angry and help refocus a child to appropriate behaviour. If they are too emotionally ‘worked-up’, we will need to organise ‘cool-off time’, or even time-out away from the classroom to enable that refocusing. “I can see you are feeling (really) upset, what you need to do now is ...”. On rare occasions where angry behaviour is dangerous we may need to restrain children who are a significant danger to themselves or others (thankfully this is normally rare). Any restraint procedures should be well understood by all staff in policy and practice (see McPherson and Rogers, 2014).

At some stage (after cool-off/time-out time) it will important to follow-up, one-to-one, with a child to help them understand the differentiation of anger-feeling and anger-behaviour.
For example in the immediate moment of the anger episode: “I can see you’re very annoyed, (upset, concerned, frustrated, fed-up, angry) …” or, after the anger episode, “I could see that you were …” By tuning in to a child’s probable feelings we help them with short-term self-awareness and the possibility of some self-control. Essentially it is calmly acknowledging their feelings (this is not the same as simply saying we ‘understand’ how they feel or, necessarily, approve …) as when a teacher says to a student: “To have someone say things like that can be very upsetting … (name the feeling eg. : ~ frustrating, annoying, upsetting, hurtful) …”, it can help make it easier for that student to believe their teacher at least understands. Denying a child’s feelings is tantamount to judging a child. Before we can help them (long-term) with more appropriate ‘emotional behaviour’ we need to demonstrate we can and will listen (at a calmer moment) (Rogers, 2003 and McPherson and Rogers, 2014).

If a student has significant, and on-going problems with anger we also need to help them learn more appropriate ways of expressing anger than just lashing out, or physically hurting others, (see later).

It is also important to teach children a ‘vocabulary of emotion’ so they do not easily overuse the word ‘angry’ when it is ‘inappropriate’ (“I’m angry ‘cos he took my red pencil …!”).

A framework for teaching anger management to children

When we teach children within an anger-management support plan:

- Teach the child about the links between angry thinking, angry feelings and angry behaviour (simple drawings as ‘social stories’, even safe role-play can all help frame, extend and develop understanding).
- We teach the basic physiology of anger.
- With older primary children we can explain and model that angry thinking ( eg “I hate him!!”  All teachers are horrible, unfair, nasty …!!”, “No-one cares about me!”) affects how uptight we feel (this is particularly helpful for older children). How we characteristically think, self-talk and rate stressful experiences significantly affects the degree of natural emotional upsetedness. This, in turn, can have a significant effect on resulting behaviour.
• Teach the child strategies for ‘self-calming’ (relaxation words; clench / unclench and *untense* face and fists and shoulder muscles; counting backwards from 10; *calm* breathing as distinct from *deep* breathing ...). See later.

**The bigger picture**

Children get frustrated or ‘angry’ for the same reasons adults do: normal life frustrations, conflict over possessions; emotional and physical teasing; hostile or aggressive acts (being pushed, shoved or even hit); verbal abuse and bullying (put-downs, lying about someone, ‘dobbing’). (Marion, 2000, Rogers, 2007 and McPherson and Rogers, 2014).

‘Aggressive anger’ is often the result of the build-up of frustration and the feeling of having ‘no-control’ (losing control). Some children (and adults) have a very low tolerance to frustration; and the ‘emotional/physiological/behavioural gap’ between frustration and aggression is very ‘narrow’(!). It can help if a teacher – noticing a child easily and quickly getting angry – to quietly tune-in to the child’s probable emotional state and acknowledge (and name) what they are probably feeling at this point. A child may also need to be refocused, or re-directed, to appropriate behaviour, or may even need cool-off time until they can regain self-control. It is also important to distinguish between the occasional angry outburst and the *characteristic* expressions of inappropriate anger behaviour.

There is a very helpful picture-story book for children, *Danny in the Toy Box* (Richard Tulloch and Armin Greder), about a little boy who gets very *cross* and illustrates how he handles his temper. Its gentle and realistic humour can help children (and adults) gain an insight into this strong emotion. I’ve used this book with whole-class groups as well as individuals.

**Anger management plans**

Some children will benefit from an individual behaviour management plan :-

- That teaches that anger as a ‘feeling’ is not bad we *all* get angry.
- Teaching the child to recognise what happen in/to our body when we feel very frustrated ... (even the ‘fight’/‘flight’ response ...).

- Teaching the child the *do* bit of anger :- *how* we think, *what* we think, *how we behave* with words and actions WHEN we get angry is something we can change for the better; “better for us, better for others”. This includes the understanding that *thinking* is also a ‘behaviour inside our head’.

- Teaching the child the awareness of body sensation, tuning-in and *untensing* face, shoulders, neck muscles, counting backwards (10 ... 0) can help in initial calming. Using *calm* breathing, (as distinct from *deep* breathing) : breathe in calmly for a count of 2 (or 3 for older children) hold for a count of 3, then breathe out for a count of 2 (or 3 for older children). These skills are practised *one-to-one* (child and teacher, or child and teaching assistant) with the child in the behaviour support sessions.

- Teach the child to be aware of situations and circumstances that lower their tolerance to frustration; an anger-diary can help to chart the ‘trigger factors’ ... Rogers, 2003). Self-awareness is a key factor in self-monitoring and self-directing of any behaviour – crucially so with frustration and temper.

- Teach the child key ‘words’ or ‘phrases’ he can say to others when he is upset, annoyed, irriated, frustrated or even angry, eg “I don’t like it when ...”, “I am angry because ...”, ...

  It can also help to teach the child some fundamental ‘I can’ statements : ‘I can calm myself when I am getting annoyed or frustrated ...’, ‘I am breathing calmly ...’, ‘I am untensing my muscles ...’ ‘I can do ...’ (instead of ‘I’ll never be able to’, ‘I can’t control ...’). In these cases we can teach simple cognitive reframing skills in one-to-one practice sessions with the child.

- Teach  SICOT : **self-imposed cool-off-time** where a child can rest his head in his hands (even at his table group/desk), close his eyes (adding the cognitive counting and calm breathing and untensing). This can be a helpful alternative to time-out away from others.
What follows are some examples of plans we have used with children. It is not the ‘quality’ of the drawing – many colleagues use simple ‘stick figure’ drawings with children up to middle school years. The drawings act as social stories and as personal *aide mémoires* for the child during classtime. (Rogers, 2003, Rogers and McPherson, 2014).

With any such plan it is important to encourage a child’s efforts at positive anger-management back in classroom contexts. For example, rather than a student easily
resorting to verbally or physically ‘fighting’ to deal with a squabble, a problem or a conflict
let them know it is O.K. (not ‘weak’) to ask an adult (a teacher or aide) to help out when they feel frustrated or angry …

“Sean, we all get angry feelings sometimes …” I find it helpful to indicate some non-verbal
cues (at this point) here to simulate – to the student – the emotion by ‘a frown’, or by a
‘churning motion near the tummy’…, or ‘clenched fists and jaw, shoulders’ … “Have you
noticed what you do – and say – when you feel like that …?” It is, then, important to help
the child be aware of what he then normally does when he feels like that and the effect
their behaviour has on others. From these kinds of discussions we – then – work with the
student on a behaviour support plan (see examples on p 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chill out, calm myself down and then refocus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I know I’m getting really annoyed, frustrated …</td>
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<tr>
<td>So; I’ll remember my plan :–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Close eyes, count back from 10: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Calm breathing for a few minutes: slow and calm; breathe in count 1, 2, 3, hold 1, 2, 3 breathe out (slowly) 1, 2, 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Untense face, shoulder muscles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Everybody gets angry at times. That’s OK to feel angry. When we get really frustrated and angry we don’t have to lash out.
Instead we can:

- Slow count upstairs and calm breathing

- Untense our muscles (face, shoulders, neck, fists …)

- Re-think, and realistic thinking (RTF), so we’ll also feel better.

So – we can take control of our anger.
Relational management

On occasion, mediation strategies can help when a child’s frustration leads to angry verbal or physical behaviour directed to another student (or teacher). After ample cool-off time the mediation process can enable the student concerned to understand the effect his behaviour has on others’ feelings. As a result they will know that while such angry behaviour is wrong, they (as a person) are not rejected; that a relationship can be re-established. Children will also be encouraged and directed to understand that (where appropriate) restitution may be required.

Where apologies are right and necessary we also add that ‘sorry words’ also need to be followed by sorry behaviour, so the other person can see you are actually sorry through ‘what you now do...’.

The relational-behaviour issues of frustration and anger may also need to be ‘formally’ discussed with the whole class as part of the overall classroom-behaviour agreement (Rogers, 2003) and also – as occasions arise with individuals – as part of a classroom meeting. Such ‘meetings’ will need the child’s understanding and permission and need to be conducted sensitively and constructively. It will also be important to share this with the parent of the child in question. In some cases we will ‘enrol’ the child in another grade/class while we conduct this sensitive issue of any individual child’s behaviour within a class-meeting format.

A classroom – a school – has to be a safe place for our children (and teachers!). Children have to learn to get along with a wide range of people (often in a small space, under the normal expectations of teaching and learning and social relationships). While it is obvious that some children will have less positive experiences than their peers, and will have seen adult models expressing feelings of frustration and anger in hostile and hurtful ways, teachers can greatly assist students’ awareness, about feelings and anger, through whole-class dialogue; positive stories, classroom-meetings, positive discipline and encouragement and individual-behaviour support plans.
What we hold on to, as teachers, is that frustration-anger behaviour is ‘learned’; dysfunctional anger behaviour can be un-learned and more appropriate anger behaviour can be relearned.

A helpful start for individuals (and even whole-class learning) are relaxation activities for children. See particularly, the excellent text :- Relaxation For Children by Jenny Rickard, (ACER Press).
References
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Appendix to notes:-

Anger and Aggression at School

These notes/illustrations are drawn from discussions with students around their common perceptions about frustration and anger. They note the typical concerns, responses and ways of focusing on how to reduce and deal with frustration and anger.

Bill Rogers
I sometimes go and do something else I like to do ...
- Read a book ...
- Draw a picture ...
- Go out on ...
(NAS)

Calm breathing; this kind of helps the inside feeling go out, like a balloon air!

I might need to just have a rest because everything is getting too much.

I can tell the person who is upsetting me I don’t like it when
WHAT I CAN DO WHEN THE FEELING OF ANGER COMES ...

- I know I can’t stop all the things that make me angry ... OR STOP PEOPLE WHO DO THESE ...
- recognise the feeling!! (annoyed? upset? fed up? temper?)
- SO, WHAT TO DO?

Sometimes I have just walked away!

I count backwards from 10, in my head ... 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0,

Calm breathing, this kind of helps the inside feeling go out, like a balloon air!

I can tell the person who is upsetting me “I don’t like it when ...”

“I don’t like it when you ...” Name the thing they do

Sometimes I will have to talk to the person who is being mean, unkind, unfair, nasty, teasing me ... If they won’t listen I can tell my mum, dad, teacher ... They can help me to work things out when I am feeling calmer ...

They will listen to me and help me and sort things out and make things better?

Who is most helpful?

*It is important the person who was hurtful talks with me and my teacher
- AT THE SAME TIME
- TALK TO US BOTH
- LISTEN TO THE THING THAT WAS DONE AND HOW WE FEEL
- MAKE SURE THAT WE KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN
- CHECK LATER

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"I don't like it when you ..."
Name the thing they do ...
What they do ...

I KNOW!
I can always do these things ...

(1) Count 10, 9, 8 ...
(2) Calm breaths
   123 (123) 123
(3) TENSE AND
UNTENSE
(4) REFOCUS

Cool-off-time for me ...
Even a glass of water
Sometimes I will have to talk to the person who is being mean, unkind, unfair, nasty, teasing me ...
I can tell my mum, dad, teacher ...
They can help me to work things out when I am feeling calmer ...
They will listen to me and help me and sort things out and make things better,
Who is most helpful?
*It is important the person who was hurtful talks with me and my teacher
- AT THE SAME TIME
- TALK TO US BOTH
- LISTEN TO THE THING THAT WAS DONE AND HOW WE FEEL
- WORKS TO PUT THINGS RIGHT
WHAT I CAN DO WHEN THE FEELING OF ANGER COMES ...

- I know I can’t stop all the things that make me angry ... OR PEOPLE!
- recognise the feeling!! (annoyed? upset? fed up? temper?)

Sometimes I have just walked away!

I count backwards from 10, in my head ... 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0.
This can distract, refocus ...