CHAPTER 3

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Rationale and Best Practices for Anger and Aggression Management Skills Training

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A central feature of any prevention-oriented discipline program is that the adults view discipline as a process for furthering education—as a way for students to gain increased competency to manage the myriad problems they encounter both in and out of school. From this perspective, discipline should be viewed as an "instrument for student success" that is linked rationally to the mission of the school (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993, p. 369). The largest, most behaviorally skilled segment of the student population is provided vehicles by which to acquire new and increasingly sophisticated coping skills through universal prevention procedures such as codes of conduct and collaboratively developed classroom rules and routines. These socially competent students typically arrive at middle and high schools already possessing most of the requisite skills to allow these primary prevention programs to be useful to them. As examples:

- They have multiple, nonaggressive coping repertoires for managing frustration and perceived personal threats.
- They are experienced and adept at acquiring adult approval and willing to be deferential to adult authority.
- They are able to regulate their anger along a continuum of intensity appropriate for the situation at hand.
- They are able to inhibit impulsive behavior in conformance to a stated rule or the general mores of socially acceptable behavior.

An effective discipline program is designed to help *all* students find success. Following the spirit of the law, as well as the legal mandate of providing an appropriate public education for everyone, the needs of that subset of students who lack some or all of these skills must be addressed systematically through the use of evidence-supported procedures. Consequently, prevention-oriented anger and aggression management skills training designated for the selected subset of students with chronic patterns of disruptive, aggressive behavior must be viewed as an essential, not optional, component of every secondary school's student discipline plan (see Figure 3.1).

It is ethically and professionally indefensible for school personnel to knowingly withhold critical knowledge and skills from any group of students, including those whose behavior they may find particularly disagreeable. Individuals with chronic patterns of disruptive, aggressive behavior are students with learning needs in every bit the same way as are students with only academic deficits. Indeed, when one compares the risk status of poorly managed aggression to that of academic underachievement, a substantive argument for an even greater need for intervention can be made in favor of the former. A colleague once observed, "Who would you rather be mar-

Out-of-building
placement

Special education
wraparound services

In-building alternative
education services are offered

Supportive services personnel
deliver effective behavioral skills training

Teachers and supportive services
deliver evidence-based classroom interventions

Teaching and administrative staff deliver
evidence-based school and classroom discipline procedures

Clear, collaboratively developed, and effectively taught
schoolwide codes of conduct guide everyone

Community-supported, districtwide
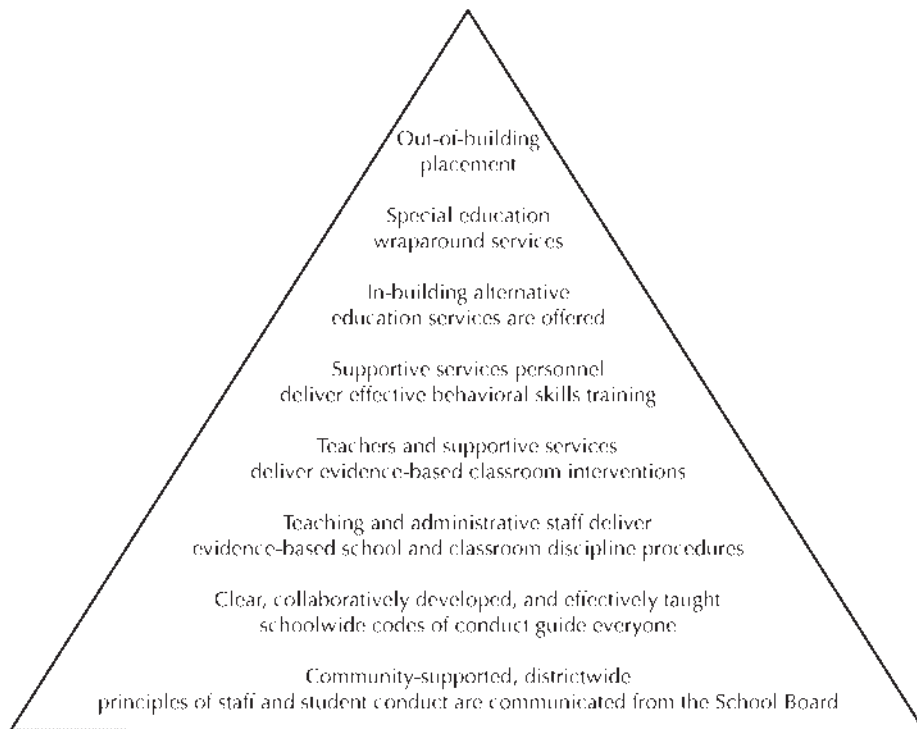principles of staff and student conduct are communicated from the School Board

FIGURE 3.1. Pyramid of schoolwide discipline.

ried to, someone who couldn't read or someone who couldn't stop from punching you in the face?"

That said, it should also be noted that providing behaviorally at-risk youth with research-based skills training targeted to their areas of greatest deficit will not guarantee socially desirable outcomes. The data show impressively that a significant portion of adolescent aggression is the latest manifestation of a well-established trajectory begun in early childhood (Loeber, 1988, 1990; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), and there has been relatively limited empirical support for even the most commonly used programs (Smith, Larson, DeBaryshe, & Salzman, 2000; Tolan & Guerra, 1994). However, even as research continues, schools have an obligation to the communities, families, and students that they serve to put forward the "best practices" known and available. This chapter attempts to address those best practices and the barriers that may preclude their implementation.

WHY JUST THE THREAT OF AVERSIVE CONSEQUENCES WILL NOT WORK

Administrators are rightly concerned about keeping their buildings safe for all staff members and students. All parents want their children to be free from any form of physical and verbal assault while they are in school and expect the building administrator to ensure that they are. The powers are granted to most administrators to unilaterally decide which incidences of student misconduct are grievous enough to warrant temporary removal from the school; therefore, it is understandable that the most common disciplinary response to aggressive behavior has been found to be out-of-school suspension (e.g., Costenbader & Markson, 1994). If the potential assailants are not physically in the building, then their ability to assault others is removed, at least for the short term. In behavioral terms, an action such as suspension out of school is negatively reinforced (see Kazdin, 2001) when it removes or terminates the aversive condition of the presence of disruptive or aggressive students. In this manner, suspension works . . . at least for the administrator. Indeed, for some it apparently works exceedingly well: In the year 2000 administrators in the Milwaukee Public Schools suspended out of school *fully 20% of their student population*, most for nonaggressive behaviors (Milwaukee Catalyst, 2001).

The research that demonstrates the negative effects of out-of-school suspension is impressive (see Skiba, 2000, for a review). However, even educators who are the most enthusiastically against out-of-school suspension will acknowledge that some circumstances may warrant it, especially those situations that require immediate protection of the individuals involved with no other way to accomplish it. Removing a student to a safe and supervised home situation for a brief "cooling-off" period can be constructive in some cases. The operative word, of course, is "supervised," and given the dual-wage-earner status of most homes, supervision is rarely available. Stu-

dents who are out of school unsupervised are at high risk to engage in community juvenile crime (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, n.d.).

Many of us can recall as children and adolescents being the recipients of some manner of threat-based coercion from our parents used as a mechanism to obtain compliance. This age-old parenting technique most often took the form of: (1) a conditional proposition ("If you aren't in by midnight . . . ") followed by (2) an aversive consequence (" . . . then you are grounded the rest of the weekend"). This method of offspring control is based on the well-established principle that individuals will alter their behavior in order to avoid an aversive consequence (Kazdin, 2001). The comparative effectiveness of this disciplinary technique hinges on four suppositions:

1. *There is an evident and genuine power and authority hierarchy.* If family membership is comprised of a recognized hierarchy, beginning with the parents and moving downward to the children, then the adolescent is able to recognize the moral authority of the parents to create such conditions.

2. *The adolescent finds the proposed consequence aversive.* For most adolescents, effective removal of previously enjoyed and anticipated freedoms through grounding is indeed aversive; hence its widespread use as a parent-issued consequence.

3. *The adolescent believes that the consequence will be carried out unfailingly.* If the offending adolescent believes that his parents are "all hat and no cattle" (as my Texas friends say) and easily talked out of it, then the anticipated aversive nature of the consequence disappears, along with its power to influence behavior.

4. *The adolescent has the requisite cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics to understand and adhere to the proposition.* As the curfew time approaches, if the adolescent lacks the intellectual ability for consequential thinking, or the ability to regulate his or her anger at having to interrupt a reinforcing condition, or the behavioral or attentional skills to manage time effectively, then the power of the remote consequence to influence compliance to authority is reduced or absent.

In a fashion similar to families, schools have the obligation to make reasonable compliance demands on the students and to organize discipline structures to increase the likelihood of their observance. The *effective* use of remote aversive consequences by school personnel (e.g., exclusion procedures of expulsion, suspension, detention) to increase student compliance to codified behavioral expectations hinges on the same four presuppositions noted earlier for adolescents in a family. Although it is entirely possible that some students inhibit aggressive behavior out of fear of the consequence of exclusion, there is no empirical data to support this proposition (Skiba, 2000). Let us see how the four essential presuppositions apply to a school policy that asserts, "If you engage in aggressive behavior, then you will be excluded (suspended, expelled) from school."

1. *There is an evident and genuine power and authority hierarchy*. Sprick (1998) hypothesized that chronically disruptive students may tend to see themselves and all adults in the school as occupying the same spot on the authority hierarchy. He proposed that for many such youths, an interaction with any adult in the building—secretary, teacher, counselor, administrator—holds virtually equal meaning and that a referral from teacher to administrator is more a *lateral* than an *ascending* move up any presumed hierarchical discipline structure. Indeed, Sprick's notion was that these students internally place themselves on equal social status with the adults, thus denying the legitimacy of a teacher or administrator to direct their behavior in any way. In other words, many chronically disruptive students may not even recognize the school's authority to implement a disciplinary procedure as a result of a firmly held "You can't tell me what to do" belief structure. Although there is no current research that supports this hypothesis, it has undeniable clinical appeal and offers a reasonable explanation for the failure of many students to be at all deterred by the prospect of an administrative referral.

2. *The adolescent finds the proposed consequence aversive*. Exclusionary discipline procedures such as out-of-school suspension are predicated on the supposition that the student actually *wants* to be in school and will be distressed to be excluded, even for a short period. It is altogether possible that a subset of aggressive, disruptive adolescents would be upset at the prospect of 3 days out of school, particularly when the event triggers a home consequence of greater aversion. However, unlike their more academically involved peers, the "fear" of missing classes and sleeping in late for 3 days does not hold the same sway for most students with chronic disruptive aggression. For a great percentage of these individuals, their school experience is defined by Bob Dylan's line, "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose."

3. *The adolescent believes that the consequence will be carried out unfailingly*. When the consequence is not aversive but, indeed, may be desirable, holding this belief may be more of an incentive than a deterrent. "Zero tolerance" policies that eliminate the ability of the administrator to enact an individualized, educational, or even more aversive consequence and instead force a suspension may be working counter to their intent (e.g., Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

4. *The adolescent has the requisite cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics to understand and adhere to the proposition*. When a student is presented with the opportunity and motivation to enact a behavior that has been previously reinforced, such as punching a peer who, one believes, deserves it, the ability to inhibit this behavior out of fear of a consequence coming later requires that this student possess a rather sophisticated degree of cognitive-emotive control. Not only must the young person find the remote consequences aversive in the first place (an issue previously addressed), but he or she must simultaneously be able to regulate escalating anger and control impulse behavior while selecting and enacting an alternative, nonaggressive response. Difficulties with affect regulation, impulse control,

and response selection are characteristics frequently seen in individuals with aggressive behavior (Dodge, 1991; Dodge et al., 1990; Lochman, Meyer, et al., 1991; Novaco, 1985). When a discipline policy makes continuance in school contingent on a set of skills that some students do not possess, the results are predictable. As an example, I can put you in front of a disassembled color television set and threaten you with all manner of terrible, escalating consequences if you don't immediately put it back together correctly. My threats are meaningless if you do not have the skills necessary to do so, and I shouldn't be surprised if you got up and walked away. In the same fashion, an administrator or a Board of Education can increase the severity of the consequence for aggression all they want, but if the student does not know how to behave—*if that student lacks the prerequisite skills to adhere to the policy*—then no level of severity will be sufficient.

WHY ALTERNATIVE AVERSIVE CONSEQUENCES ARE NOT ENOUGH

A growing number of middle and high schools, perhaps heeding the research literature, have begun experimenting with aversive disciplinary consequences that do not involve out-of-school suspensions. Typically these consequences involve some form of in-school suspension, Saturday school, or after-school detentions (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northrup, LaFleur, & Spera, 1996). These efforts constitute a double-edged sword. In the case of in-school suspension, although students are excluded from the classroom, they remain under competent adult supervision, which eliminates the possibility of community misbehavior during school hours. The positives associated with this alternative should not be underestimated. An administrator colleague remarked to me that sending chronically misbehaving students into the community for 3 to 5 days "only gives them practice in what to do and who to hang out with when they drop out."

Second, when a school replaces out-of-school suspension with in-school suspension, a considerably diminished rejection message is relayed. The misbehaving student is informed that although the behavior is unacceptable and will have a negative consequence, the education personnel believe that the student rightly belongs and is welcome in the school building. This simple message may contribute to helping high-risk youths maintain a sense, even if tenuous, of belonging to the school, and this cognitive-emotional bond has been shown to be a critical factor in both violence and dropout prevention (Hawkins et al., 1992).

The negative edge of this double-edged sword lies in the belief that the somewhat progressive and enlightened step of replacing out-of-school suspension with in-school suspension is a sufficient adjustment to meet the needs of all students. It is not. Aversive consequences, educationally benign or not, do not teach new and complex cop-

ing skills to unskilled youths. Offending students with chronic patterns of aggressive behavior who are doing work sheets in the in-school suspension room may be inconvenienced and are probably longing to be elsewhere, but they are assuredly not learning the skills needed to avoid coming back another day.

Nor does the addition of some form of written or verbal reflection on the incident serve a useful purpose for such needy students. Many in-school suspension programs, seeking to move beyond simple aversive boredom as their consequence, require that the students engage in a "behavioral debriefing" procedure with the adult in charge. This well-intentioned exercise may provide the student with insight into his or her responsibility for the problem, and he or she may even go on to discuss alternative behaviors that might have been enacted to avoid the problem. Presumably, there is hope that the student will take these insights away from the discussion and use them to avoid future difficulties. For chronically aggressive and behaviorally unskilled students, however, some may assert that this exercise is akin to "giving chicken soup to a corpse: It can't hurt." But it *can* hurt if the school personnel believe that merely providing guided insight for these students is an "intervention" and if they subsequently move to more exclusionary discipline measures when the students "fail to respond." The implementation of well-meaning but inadequate, empirically unsupported disciplinary interventions is among the greatest barriers to success faced by high-risk students.

BEST PRACTICES

As noted, the implementation of purely reactive disciplinary procedures to meet the behavioral needs of chronically aggressive middle and high school students is unlikely to be sufficient. In-school aversive consequences must be paired with an additional preventative educational component that effectively teaches the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary for success in the school environment. The following are essential components of that education.

Anger Management

Not all adolescent assaults in the school are fueled by anger, but for those students with chronic patterns of aggression that have been unresponsive to traditional reactive disciplinary measures, aggression often follows poorly regulated anger arousal (Feindler & Ecton, 1986). Consequently, helping students to understand and control anger is a particularly important skills training component.

The following useful definition of anger was offered by Kassinove and Sukhodolsky (1995): "a negative, phenomenological (or internal) feeling state associated with specific cognitive and perceptual distortions and deficiencies (e.g., mis-

appraisals, errors and attributions of blame, injustice, preventability and/or intentionality), subjective labeling, physiological changes, and action tendencies to engage in socially constructed and reinforced behavioral scripts" (p. 7). This definition highlights the three most salient elements of the anger experience—physiological, cognitive, and behavioral—the understanding of which is essential to the task of anger control and must be addressed in any skills-training effort.

The hypothesized causal relationship that anger may or may not have to aggression has been the subject of considerable study and opinion. Some researchers (most notably Berkowitz, 1993) hold that angry feelings do not directly cause aggression but rather that they accompany an already existing inclination to aggression. It is clear that some adolescents who are aggressive do not display any obvious signs of anger. Bully behavior, as an example, is most frequently seen as physical or verbal aggression directed at a less powerful victim, but it is rarely motivated by poorly controlled anger (Olweus, 1991; but see also Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999, for research on a possible anger correlate). This sort of aggressive behavior, designed to obtain some manner of goal (e.g., victim humiliation) but rarely motivated by anger, has been referred to as *instrumental aggression* (e.g., Spielberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995) or *proactive aggression* (Dodge, 1991). Many bullies and other student aggressors of this type typically do not have serious anger control problems and may instead be more responsive to interventions that involve increased supervision and aversive consequences. Acts of aggression that are heavily influenced by anger control problems have been referred to as *hostile aggression* (e.g., Spielberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995) or *reactive aggression* (Dodge, 1991). This is the kind of student aggression typically precipitated by the intense physiological arousal and cognitive distortions described in Kassinove and Sukhodolsky's (1995) definition of anger noted earlier, and these are the students who may benefit most from anger control training.

This dichotomous, reactive–proactive conceptualization of aggressive types is useful for educators as they consider the potential environmental and individual variables associated with any act of student aggression. However, it is important to recognize that these are very rarely pure types, except in extreme cases. "All behaviors have aspects of reaction and proaction, in that one can make guesses regarding the precipitants as well as the functions of all behaviors" (Dodge, 1991, p. 206). Caution is recommended against the inclination to oversimplify this helpful, but still theoretical, construct by wrongly labeling students as just one or the other. The student targeted for anger control training, however, will demonstrate predominantly reactive aggressive characteristics.

Meichenbaum (2001) described reactive aggression in the following manner:

> Impulsive aggression, often called *reactive aggression*, is <u>unplanned</u> aggressive acts which are <u>spontaneous</u> in action: either <u>unprovoked</u> or <u>out of proportion</u> to the provocation

and occurs among persons who are characterized as *"having a short fuse."* Such *reactive aggression* involves retaliatory intent, often driven by frustration, biological impulses and relatively independent of premeditated cognitive processes. (p. 20; emphasis in original)

Middle and high school students who exhibit this kind of "short fuse" aggressive response to what appears to be only minor provocation by peers or adults are the primary targets for anger control training. Helping students learn to curb this short fuse requires that the training address the three elements of impulsive anger—poorly regulated physiological responses, distorted cognitions, and aggressive behavior. With that understanding, the following procedures are the essential elements of a school-based anger and aggression control program, presented in the recommended order of training. It is important to note that the procedures introduced here and expanded on later in this book are cognitive-behavioral skills training, not "psychotherapy" in its traditional conceptualization. They focus on elements in the current environment and existing social-cognitive skill deficits that occasion anger and aggression rather than hypothesizing about and addressing remote causes.

Anger and Aggression Education

The initial step in an anger and aggression control program is to provide the students with intellectual insight into the nature and function of both anger and aggression. This is done so that everyone in the group has as close to a common understanding as possible when the terms are utilized in the training weeks to come. The group examines and proposes their own definitions of "healthy anger" that helps avoid unwanted problems with significant others (e.g., teachers, administrators, police, parents) and may lead to desirable, productive change. This is compared with "unhealthy anger" that is more intense than warranted by the situation and that may lead to unwanted problems with significant others. An essential aspect of understanding their experience of anger is acquiring the insight that the intensity of the feeling runs a continuum from mild irritation to their more familiar highly intense experience. How an individual labels a feeling is critical to his or her understanding and control of it. If the students conceptualize anger *only* as their typical rage response, then "being angry" can only mean being enraged. This aspect of the affective education procedures seeks to normalize human anger, and the students are introduced to a functional vocabulary (e.g., "irritated," "peeved," "put out") to label less intense feelings.

Students are subsequently led toward a functional definition of aggression, including physical, verbal, and relational types. Insights into the subject of aggression are shared, such as how posture and language can be construed as aggressive acts by others and when and where physical aggression may be in the students' best interests. Finally, the students are led to insights regarding the relationship between unhealthy anger and aggression.

Cue Recognition and Self-Calming

"How do you know that you are becoming angry?" Although it may be the first time anyone ever posed the question, individuals without anger problems will often readily reply with answers such as: "I can feel my face become flushed," or "I can feel my heart start to accelerate." Such individuals who are able to regulate the intensity of their anger under multiple conditions are generally able to answer that question with little difficulty. This is so because their ability to exercise the necessary control starts with a phenomenological recognition of the feeling: They know what their own anger feels like, and that feeling serves as a cue to exert their control mechanisms. This phenomenological self-awareness is often a much greater problem for students with chronic, anger-related aggression.

One reason that this ability may be a problem for such students is simply that they have seldom felt the need to control their anger. Their answer to the question "How do you know that you are becoming angry?" very often brings forth a behavior rather than an internal feeling: *"Because I start hitting the guy."* These adolescents know that they are angry when they are up in a teacher's face or pummeling a fellow student with their fists. The time between the state of nonanger and the state of rage is often so slight as to make the whole notion of "escalating" anger almost meaningless to them. Yet in order to learn control of their anger, their first step is to learn recognition of those initial physiological cues.

Tied closely to cue recognition is the first training in anger control, what is referred to as "self-calming" procedures. The students are trained in simple relaxation methods (e.g., controlled breathing) or refocusing procedures (e.g., backward counting) to quickly, but only temporarily, control the escalating intensity as preparation for additional skill enactments to follow.

Attribution Retraining

One of the most important cognitive skills of nonaggressive individuals is their ability to effectively read a variety of social cues and consider multiple attributions for the behavior of others. Attributions are the individual's explanation to himself or herself regarding the intent of another's actions. If you bump into me and I attribute your action to benign carelessness, then I am unlikely to become upset. In essence, I am telling myself to remain calm and that there is no reason to become angry. On the other hand, if I attribute it to a hostile act on your part, a wholly different feeling may ensue. Research with aggressive children and adolescents (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge et al., 1990) has demonstrated that biased attributions play a role in reactive aggression.

The term "hostile attributional bias" (Dodge & Newman, 1981; Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1979) has been used to describe a cognitive process in which aggressive individuals regularly interpret the behavior of others as hostile, even in sit-

uations that are benign or ambiguous. Kendall et al. (1991) referred to this as the "tendency to 'assume the worst' regarding the intention of peers in ambiguous (neither hostile nor benign) situations" (p. 345). Exploration of this tendency (e.g., Dodge & Tomlin, 1987; Hudley, 1994) has led to the hypothesis that such a bias is in part a function of the individual's tendency "to respond based on past experience rather than all available social cues" (Hudley, 1994, p. 45). In other words, aggressive students may lack the skill to access critical information when engaged in decision-making strategies. This is a critical feature of anger control training because the probability and intensity of anger increases if the action is judged intentional (Deffenbacher, 1999).

Consider Michael, a very hot-headed and aggressive eighth-grade student, who is eating with a group of fellow students in the school lunchroom. The student sitting next to him tips his milk carton over, and some of its contents pour onto Michael's lap, not an uncommon occurrence in middle school lunchrooms. This is a benign or at least ambiguous encounter up to this point. Metaphorically speaking, the ball is now in Michael's court to infer intent for the spillage. Youths with high levels of reactive aggression have a greater than typical expectation that others will be hostile toward them. Consequently, they are hypervigilant for confirming evidence. For Michael the milk on his trousers is just such evidence.

A less aggressive student might immediately start a search for environmental cues that would help him determine whether the milk on his pants was the result of an accident or a hostile act. For most nonaggressive youths, the default inference in such circumstances is "accident," and they are alert for those expected social cues. A subsequent nonaggressive behavioral response characteristically follows. When an attribution of hostile intent is missing, then the likelihood of aggression diminishes. In secondary-level schools, this typically benign student attribution for the multitude of minute-to-minute interpersonal transgressions may be a major reason that the school can function at all!

But for students such as Michael, the default attribution is not accident but hostility, a purposeful, aggressive act. This expectation is so strong that Michael will ignore current, relevant social cues to the contrary (e.g., quick apologies, offers of a napkin) and rely much more heavily on his memory of previous similar encounters either with this student or in this context. He infers intent, and his behavioral response is aggressive. He swears at his perceived attacker and shoves him. The other student, who is now the recipient of a clearly aggressive act, moves into an equally clear counteraggressive posture and rises to meet Michael's aggression. This counteraggressive behavior has the effect of confirming for Michael that his original attribution of hostility was accurate, and, thus, it is reinforced. Another lunchroom fracas is on.

Attribution re-training to assist students at risk for aggressive behavior has been demonstrated to have positive outcomes with elementary-age boys (Hudley, 1992; Hudley et al., 1998; see Chapter 1, this volume). No research to date has been under-

taken to examine similar effects on middle or high school students, and this is a serious gap in the literature. The basic research data (e.g., Dodge et al., 1990) offer compelling evidence that attributions play a significant role in the frequency and intensity of anger-induced reactive aggression in both children and adolescents. Consequently, the inclusion of a component to address this process in an anger control training program for adolescents is clinically warranted, even ahead of the applied research. Insight is provided into the fact that anger does not "just happen" but is heavily related to how a student individually chooses to appraise a situation and the relative accuracy of that appraisal. The training elements utilize role play and "think aloud" procedures in conjunction with hypothetical and actual scenarios to help the students learn to consider alternative attributions.

Self-Instructional Training

Training middle and high school adolescents with anger and aggression control problems to "talk to themselves" is an essential component of an effective program. The concept of teaching self-instruction as an intervention to guide behavior originated with Meichenbaum and Goodman (1971) in their classic work with impulsive children. Since that time, it has established a solid place in the clinical treatment of children, adolescents, and adults with anger control problems (e.g., Feindler & Ecton, 1986; Feindler, Ecton, Kingsley, & Dubey, 1986; Feindler, Marriott, & Iwata, 1984; Larson, 1992; Lochman, White, & Wayland, 1991; Meichenbaum, 2001). Self-instructional training is a technique that provides the youth with a cognitive alternative to his or her more characteristic biased, distorted, or deficient script. As noted by Rokke and Rehm (2001), "An explicit assumption is that an individual's self-instructions mediate behavior and behavior change. In many cases maladaptive self-statements may contribute to a person's problems. The learning and application of more adaptive self-instructions are the goals of self-instructional training" (p. 178). Meichenbaum (2001, p. 281) addressed the differential uses of self-instruction during the phases of an anger encounter:

- Preparing for the stressful encounters and getting worked up (anticipating provocative event).
- Having to deal with perceived provocation and confrontations.
- Dealing with anger at its most intense point.
- Reflecting back on how they handled the situation.

During these meetings students are further trained in the concept introduced in attribution retraining regarding how their own internal language can influence their anger to escalate or moderate in intensity. Self-instructional training provides the students with suggested self-statements that have been used by other adolescents (e.g., "Cool down"; "Chill out"; "I can handle this") and also encourages the students to

tap their own vocabularies to develop more individualized coping statements. Through role play and self-monitoring procedures, training focuses on helping the students to effectively identify the circumstances and timing for the use of self-instruction as an anger control procedure.

Problem-Solving Skills Training

For you, the predominantly high-achieving professionals and graduate students who are the readers of this book, the likelihood is great that you possess impressive problem-solving abilities. On a regular basis, you encounter situations of ambiguity, possible threat, or provocation and somehow manage to find an adaptive response. Imagine a situation in which you are driving along a four-lane highway and another driver cuts in front of you, causing you to have to brake quickly. Almost instantaneously, you address the problem by backing off from the intruding vehicle and continuing your drive (perhaps muttering a few choice words). This is the adaptive response of individuals without problematic anger and aggression, and it is the result of a well-learned problem-solving strategy. In this case (1) you recognized the problem, (2) considered your options, (3) weighed their relative merits, (4) selected the best response, and (5) enacted it, all in the blink of an eye. This highly adaptive, cognitive-behavioral skill that you employ with regularity across multiple contexts and among multiple individuals may be one of the primary reasons you are not reading these words from a prison cell.

The impulsive anger and aggression responses that characterize reactive-aggressive youths necessarily preclude or seriously undermine the application of systematic problem-solving strategies. Highly aggressive children and adolescents have been shown to demonstrate biased appraisal of hostile intent (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge et al., 1990), deficient solution-generating skills (Lochman & Dodge, 1994), and more physically aggressive responses (Pepler, Craig, & Michaels, 1998; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Problem-solving training is the logical next step in the effort to assist identified students to better manage their problematic anger and aggression.

The goal of problem-solving training is to help the identified students perceive the myriad provocations they encounter in the school day as *problems to be solved* (Meichenbaum, 2001) rather than *personal assaults* to be settled with aggression. This is approached by teaching the students to conceptualize the problem as a sequential series of skills in stepwise form, including "(1) problem definition and formulation, (2) generation of alternative solutions, (3) decision-making, and (4) solution implementation and verification" (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999, p. 215).

As an example, consider a hypothetical circumstance in which a student is unfairly accused of cheating by his teacher, who snatches his test off his desk.

1. *What is the problem?* Students are taught to step back (sometimes even literally) and define the problem in terms of their own participation and their own goals.

"The problem is the teacher thinks I was cheating, but I wasn't. I want to be able to finish my test and not get sent out."

2. *What are my possible responses?* In this step the students are asked to generate as many feasible responses as they can that will address the problem and help them to obtain their desired goal.

"I could grab the paper back and tell her she was wrong."
"I could ask other students if they saw me cheating."
"I could ask her if I could talk to her in private."

3. *What will happen if . . . ?* Students are asked to reflect on the most likely consequences of each of the responses they generated. Skills associated with consequential thinking are also trained at this juncture.

"If I grab it, she will probably get even more upset and throw me out for that!"
"If I ask for witnesses, she won't like to be shown-up by the other kids and might get angrier."
"If I see her in private, she might be willing to listen. At least I won't make things worse."

4. *Which one will I choose?* At this step students need to select a response that is in their best interest based on their assessment of the most likely consequences and one that they have the necessary skills to enact.

"I will ask her if we can speak in private at her desk."

5. *How did it work out?* This step involves training the students to use self-reinforcement if the selected response was successful and self-coaching if it was not. Students need to learn how to recognize and be proud of their successful efforts and also acquire the skills needed to cope with and learn from failures.

Behavioral Skills Training

It has been said that *knowing about* the correct behavior is not the same thing as understanding how to actually *engage in* the correct behavior. Learning a novel behavior requires not only intellectual insight but also correct practice. One can observe an accomplished pianist play a Scott Joplin rag and understand that he or she is reading the notes on the sheet music and reassigning the written notes to finger movements on the keyboard. This is simple intellectual insight or knowing about the behavior. But for a novice pianist, it would take many hours of correct practice to

actually demonstrate the behavior of playing a Joplin rag. In the same way, students with reactive–aggressive behavior patterns absolutely must move beyond simply knowing about new, prosocial behaviors to actively engaging in the correct practice of them. In my clinical experience, I have observed that the failure of otherwise accomplished therapists to unrelentingly engage this "practice principle" with reactively aggressive youths is the most prominent variable in poor counseling outcomes. Knowing about the uses of self-instruction or knowing about uses of verbal assertion is necessary, but not sufficient, to obtain the desired behavioral changes.

In effective skills training, the students are not merely passive recipients of insights and suggestions; they spend much of their training period up on their feet practicing new skills or engaging in behavioral rehearsal for an anticipated provocation or stressor. Behavioral skills training permeates the entire intervention and is based on the knowledge that (1) the students first need to learn how to perform the new behavior in the group setting, (2) they need to then learn how to generalize the new behavior to the authentic setting, and (3) they need to ultimately assimilate the new behavior into their regular coping repertoires. Given the risk status of highly aggressive adolescents, this is indeed a daunting set of goals. Yet if there is a perfect setting in which to make the effort, it is the public school.

Why School-Based Training?

Schools are ideal settings in which to undertake the effort of helping adolescents with anger and aggression problems, in large part because the task aligns well with the functions of the institution, that is, teaching and learning. Skills training of this sort contains many elements similar to those of traditional course work: a licensed adult in charge, students with learning needs and behavioral expectations, a curriculum in the form of a training manual, and explicit goals and objectives. The business of middle and high schools is to provide students with the knowledge and skills to be successful in and out of the academic venue, and that is entirely consonant with the business of those who seek to provide behavioral management knowledge and skills to high-risk students. In addition, the following elements argue for school-based training:

- Critical assessment data can be easily gathered through existing school record review, direct observation methods, or functional behavioral assessment interviews with classroom teachers, requiring less reliance on client self-report.
- Progress-monitoring data in the form of teacher reports, truancy reports, discipline referrals, and other authentic data can be acquired on an hourly basis if need be.
- Schoolwide and classroom environmental factors, such as positive behavioral supports and effective aversive consequences, can be influenced and manipu-

    lated during training to assist the intervention and lead to improved under-
standing of student needs.

- Classrooms and other social–academic settings in the school provide rich and abundant opportunities for student clients to observe prosocial models and engage in authentic-setting rehearsal strategies;
- The presence of a large cadre of other education professionals (teachers, administrators, and pupil services personnel) affords opportunities for trainer consultation, collaboration, and, when needed, personal support.

Summary

Addressing the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students who attend the public school system is a Herculean but legally and ethically mandated obligation. Meeting those needs for students with aggressive behavior problems requires that school personnel advance significantly beyond traditional offerings and implement creative, even extraordinary, measures and programs. Students who engage in anger-induced aggressive behavior that has been unresponsive to ordinary discipline and administrative reactions create a volatile condition that the school must address. Included with the obligation to protect other students and staff members is the obligation to provide these very high-risk students with the knowledge and skills they need to become productive citizens.

    The knowledge and skills to effectively control aggressive anger responses cannot be learned at home while on out-of-school suspension. Nor can they be learned in an at-risk academic support program or an in-school suspension or after-school detention room. In order to address the needs of reactive-aggressive youths, school personnel must commit to the addition of a targeted skills-training program that focuses on the research-supported cognitive and behavioral deficits of these students. Intervention efforts that vary remarkably from this model, including insight-oriented counseling and classroom-based anger management curricula, are not supported in the literature as being effective. For administrators and pupil services personnel this effort will require that existing discipline, intervention, and staff training priorities be reexamined and personnel resources reallocated.