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Anger, Aggression and Adolescents

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by Jean Q. Davis

Why do fights highlight the discussion of the day in my classroom? Why do we spend so much classroom time on interpersonal relationships? Why, at the slightest provocation or frustration, does a stream of profanity follow in the hall, if not in the classroom? Why is there widespread concern over violence on TV and in the movies? What is aggression? How do the theorists view aggression? What are some of the historical and current cultural issues that influence this generation of teens and how is aggression manifested? Finally, what are some of the ways we can help our students see and use alternatives to fighting in school and out? These are the questions I will consider in my unit.

Americans have traditionally possessed a love-hate relationship with aggression. Are we frontiersmen or civilized folk? Typically we view aggression negatively, especially antisocial forms; but we also value assertiveness and independence. We view these traits as important in “making it” in our culture. Most believe there is a natural tendency for humans to behave aggressively and that parents, schools and teachers have to teach self control. Psychoanalytic theorists, ethologists and sociobiologists have contributed to this belief.

Most theorists regard aggression as part of our human biological heritage. Freud emphasized the destructive aspects of aggression and did not believe that the good side would triumph in our innate conflicts and struggles. C. Darwin and the ethologist K. Lorenz viewed humans’ natural aggressiveness as self-defending and as having adaptive significance in that it is useful to us. (Tarvis, 1982, 8; Ziegler, Lamb, Child, 1982). The sociobiologists gave testosterone prenatally to female monkeys and observed them to be more aggressive than those not treated. So there is an innate component of aggressiveness that is biological and hormonal. (Ziegler, Lamb, Child, 1982).

However, just as most believe aggression is part of each of us, most also believe that aggressive behavior can be modified by experience in both positive and negative ways.

We can learn aggressive behavior by imitation of both live and televised models, and we can also learn to control our aggressive instincts. As teachers we see children bring patterns from home and from watching TV and movies. Patterson, a social psychologist, (Patterson and Cobb, 1971) and his colleagues looked at the family histories of children referred for treatment for out-of-control aggressive behavior. He found that if parents responded to a child’s acting out behavior with a punitive response, a spiral of more and more aggressive behavior on both sides followed. When a parent was less aggressive, the child then was calmer. Patterson concluded by saying that teachers can help by maximizing positive social interactions in the

classroom.

In another study that has relevance in working with teenage mothers and their parenting skills, Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) found that when parents punished their toddlers' aggressive behavior, the children were less aggressive. In a follow-up study several years later of the children, the surprising result was these children were more aggressive with their peers than those children who had not been punished. Sears saw this as a consequence of a child's identification and imitation of his parents at this stage.

There is voluminous research on what children learn by imitating aggressive behavior on TV. Generally studies show that there is substantial correlation between the amount of violent TV watched and individual aggressiveness (Jackson, 82). By chance, a school age mother told me of a physical altercation she had with the father of her baby on the same day as I watched an episode of "Dynasty" on TV. The climax of the evenings episode was a fight between the main male and female characters. The scene concluded with the male lead receiving an enormous facial scratch. It is an interesting problem trying to help children use alternatives to aggressive behavior when rich and famous stars depict antisocial behavior so graphically on TV. However, Eron (1972) in his research, has shown that the effects of violent TV are mitigated if parents show they clearly disapprove of the violent behavior.

Today our ambivalence about aggression is particularly acute. What are the boundaries between expressing one's feelings and the rights of others? What are the cultural and historical events that hold us in this dilemma in the 80's? The events of the 60's, parenting changes, loss of innocence in childhood, TV, the feminist movement, and changes in family structure are the factors I will discuss that have contributed to this ambivalence.

Obviously, it is impossible to define all cultural and historical issues, but my interest is from the 1960's on. The teenagers we are working with now were born of young adults of the 1960's period, and a significant number of teachers were shaped by that period in our history too. We are a product of our age, and our school children reflect that.

The 60's were a time of national affluence and a high rate of employment with sophisticated means of mass communication. The television industry had use of satellites for instant replay of any event, anywhere, at any time. It was a time of hope, altruism, a time to cure our social ills. Into this rosey picture came the draft and the unpopular Vietnam war, black dissatisfaction with social and economic inequities, and a growing cynicism about government and its leaders. Young people of all strata of society learned that authority was vulnerable all at the same time. Dissent was contagious and powerful. (Grams and Waetjen, 1975). Being aggressive worked and sometimes non-violent civil disobedience seemed slow.

Grams and Waetjen (1975) suggest that one of the outcomes of this dissent was that language was "liberated." Four-letter words became common and no longer shock the way they once did. Marie Winn (1983) states that "the freedom to express anger in words has become one of the sacred rights of American kids." Heaven forbid that we should hold in our frustrations. "Regular expression of open aggression . . . by a child toward a parent was unthinkable in the context of a normal family" before 1960.

Another outcome was the movement away from the double standard between the sexes. Women began to express their dissatisfaction with second-class status at home and at work. The demise of "the lady" meant a relaxation of standards in dress and speech codes for women. Some would say women were being assertive; others would view them as aggressive. However it is labeled, the changing role of women has had a profound effect on children and families.

Previously it was expected that children learn to control their aggressive impulses at home and in the community; the schools continued the modifying process. The boundary between adult and child was clear. A child was to be protected, kept innocent and controlled. Dr. Comer, in a speech at Hillhouse High School, spoke of an incident from his childhood when he did something out of line on his way home from school and assumed no one saw his wrongdoing. However, in the few short blocks home, the community network was in place so that his mother knew by the time he got home and the punishment quickly followed. With single parent and two parent working families, that network has eroded in all communities. Because of work schedules, supervision has decreased. Marie Winn speaks of some homes as “islands of freedom where anything goes.” As we all know, children soon learn where those homes are.

The TV also has contributed to the loss of self-control; it has become an alternative to parental discipline. Often children were told to mind, not to interrupt, and to play quietly so that the parents could get the work of the household done. Children had to behave in acceptable, disciplined ways. Now, after a day at work, it is so much easier for a parent to say “go watch TV.”

In *Children Without Childhood* M. Winn (1983) makes the case for a change in the family pecking order within the home—the traditional male over female over children. As women began standing up for their equality in decision-making, it made it harder for them to be authoritarian with their children. Women began bringing up children less repressively, to express their own feelings more openly just as their mothers were doing.

In conclusion, the boundary between adult and child is blurred. Children are not innocent, rather they resemble adults closely in language, dress and particularly in the things they know about. Innocence has been impossible to preserve, with any topic being fair game on TV and with the stresses accompanying changes in the family structure. We expect children to be prepared and tough for an increasingly complex world.

As Comer reminds us, children assume the responsibilities and burdens of adulthood at an early age. And, as Greathouse and Miller say in their chapter on “The Black American” in *Culture and Childrearing*: (1981, p. 82)

What many parents call aggressive behavior, Black parents might call defensive behavior. Some fear that passivity or non aggressiveness in our children has or can lead to acceptance of and adjustment to an unjust society. Most Blacks feel that youngsters must be taught to protect themselves at an early age.

What do we do with these tough, knowledgeable, aggressive children in the school setting? What are some ways to take this toughness and to use it constructively? One way is to remember that they are still children emotionally, even if they do look and talk like not-so miniature adults. Another way I propose is to teach them skills and decision making strategies to help them to be competent and assertive, not hostile and aggressive.

Lesson I

Objective To provide students with terms and concepts about coping with difficult situations. To identify situations in which they feel conflicted and to develop awareness of their own style of coping.

Procedure

1. Begin with a discussion of identifying difficult situations in their own lives. What issues are causing problems at home with parents or siblings, or at school with teachers or work or with

friends of both sexes?

2. Hand out prepared sheet of "Ways of Coping With Difficult Situations." By discussion be sure all terms are understood. Ask for further ideas from their own experience.

Ways of Coping with Difficult Situations

Positive Coping

Admitting (recognizing) problem

Finding out more information

Look at alternatives

Talking and discussing

Group support

Seeking advice or help

Compromise

Trying to see the other side

Thinking about the future

Physical exercise

Share feelings

Negative Coping

Ignoring problem

Acting like you don't care

Acting helpless

Withdrawing

Generalizing

Physical fighting

Escaping with drugs, alcohol

Running away

Rejecting other person

Being cruel and nasty

3. As a part of a journal writing exercise and a lesson in self-awareness, have students write a short essay or paragraph in answer to the question:

“When I’m very upset I . . .”

If they have trouble getting started it is often helpful to have an open discussion of possibilities. Do include: crying, eating, taking a walk, listening to music or TV, fighting.

Lesson II

Objective To provide opportunity for students to discuss their views about positive and negative coping skills. To build an increased vocabulary of styles of coping.

Procedure The following situations are case studies of scenes from home—between siblings, parents and parent-child; scenes from school; and scenes from the street between friends. One can pick and choose those appropriate for his classroom or devise new ones that would deal with current issues within a classroom.

Divide the class into small groups and give each a scene. Their task is to identify the conflict in the scene and to give the coping style used to handle the conflict.

I have included several variations of situations: one is a scene where the options are included and the student identifies the coping style; another is a scene with parts where students can do role-playing; and the last is a scene where the student identifies the conflict and gives possible ways of coping on his own.

Situation #1

Vicki has been dating Ronnie for six months. They have a good relationship and they have agreed to date only one another. Vicki is with a group of her friends after school one day when her friend says, “Do you know what Marcia told me? She said that Ronnie has been seeing Elizabeth after he sees you. Did you know?”

Vicki was really angry. How dare Ronnie do this to her?

Conflict:

1. Vicki decides that she is going to fight Elizabeth and gets her group of friends to agree to do it. She just wants to get back at Ronnie, so she thinks this is the best way to do it. Coping style:
2. She decides that Ronnie is stupid like all the others—that he can’t be trusted and lies. So she decides not to answer his calls or see him. Coping style:
3. Vicki decides that she is going to check with Ronnie and discuss this with him. Coping style:

Situation #2

Patricia is on her way home. She meets Charles and Maria, two of her friends. They want her to come to Maria's house because Maria's mother will be out that night and Maria wants to have a party. Patricia has to go home to take care of her Mom who is sick. She wants to go to Maria's and feels badly that she can't. She's worried that her friends won't understand that she has to go home.

Maria: Hi! Where are you going?

Patricia: Home.

Charles: Don't go home. Come over to Maria's. We're having a party.

Patricia: I don't feel like going to a party.

Maria: Come on! It will be fun. Michael's coming and Denise. You'll have a good time.

Charles: Yeah. We'll get you relaxed and ready to party.

Patricia: I'm not really in the mood.

Maria: What! You always like parties.

Patricia: Well, let's just say I'm tired.

Maria: What's the matter with you?

Patricia: Nothing.

Charles: Oh come on, Maria. Can't you see? Patricia's in a bad mood. Let's go.

Maria: Well, okay. Sorry you can't come.

Patricia goes home feeling bad. Her friends don't understand and think she really didn't want to go.

Identify—conflict

—coping styles

—alternative coping styles

Situation #3

Brenda is a senior in high school. She plans to go to college. One of her classes is science which is required for graduation. Part of the science class involves attending a laboratory session once a week where Brenda works with a partner. Brenda has been assigned to work with Veronica in the lab, however, Brenda *can't stand* Veronica. During the last lab, Veronica was very nasty to Brenda in front of several other students. This week right before the class was over, Veronica again was nasty and mean to Brenda in front of several of her friends. Brenda was insulted and angry.

How can Brenda handle this situation?

What are her choices?

Situation #4

Eric and Patricia have just gone to the movies on their fifth date. They go to Eric's house where his parents have gone to bed. Eric begins to make a move on Patricia, and it becomes clear to her that Eric wants to have sex. Patricia is uncomfortable and isn't ready to have sex with Eric.

What are Patricia's choices for handling this situation?

Positive?

Negative?

Situation #5

Mrs. Smith wants her son, Dan, to do the laundry three times a week. Dan doesn't want to do the laundry at all and doesn't think this should be his responsibility.

How can Dan work out this conflict with his mother?

Lesson III

Objective To increase skills in identifying conflict and coping skills.

Procedure Show film "Are We Still Going to the Movies?"

1. Ask students to look for the conflict and how each of the main characters is handling the conflict. This is a very up-to-date film about sexual decision-making. One could use another film, short story, TV show or book to raise the same questions.
2. Answer the following questions either as a discussion or as a written exercise.
 - Identify the conflict in the film
 - How did Dana feel?
 - How did Jack feel?
 - How did Dana cope?
 - How did Jack cope?
 - What do you think happened?
 - What would have made this situation different?
3. Homework: Look at three TV shows—one children's show (cartoon or PBS), one afternoon story and a favorite prime time show. Record acts of violence, aggression, conflict.

Lesson IV

Objective To increase students' awareness of styles of coping and identifying conflict.

Procedure

1. Use homework assignment from Lesson III as a basis for discussion. Take each kind of TV programming and analyze for conflict and the corresponding response. Did these actors portraying children or adults use a positive or negative style? Count the number of violent acts in each category. How did parents act with children; was it different than between two adults? Is their own style influenced by what they see on TV or in the movies? Are their parents influenced?
2. As another journal writing exercise have students write of their own last fight. What upset them? How did they react? Was there a resolution to the conflict? How could it have been handled differently?

Notes

Clark, Ann L., ed. *Culture and Childrearing* . Philadelphia: F.A. Davis. 1981.

Comer, James P. and Poussaint, Alvin F. *Black Child Care* . New York: Simon and Schuster. 1975.

Elkind, David. *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. 1984.

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Jackson, Anthony W., ed. *Black Families and the Medium of Television* . Ann Arbor: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy. 1982.

Patterson, G.R.. "The Aggressive Child: Victim and Architect of a Coercive System," In L.A.. Hammerlynck, L.C. Handy and E.J. Mash, eds. *Behavior Modification and Families* . New York: Brunner/ Mazell. 1976.

Sears, R.R., Maccoby, E.E., and Levin, H. *Patterns of Childrearing* . Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1957.

Tarvis, Carol. *Anger—The Misunderstood Emotion* . New York: 1982.

Winn, Marie. *Children Without Childhood* . New York: Pantheon Books. 1983.

Zigler, E., Lamb, M.E., Child, I.L. *Socialization and Personality Development* . Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1982.

Bibliography for Teachers

Elkind, David. *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* . Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. 1984.

The title speaks for itself. Elkind makes the case that parents of the “me generation” are more committed to their own self-fulfillment than to their children. Teens are pressured into taking on adult responsibilities by parents, a neglectful school system and the media.

Jackson, Anthony W., ed. *Black Families and the Medium of Television* . Ann Arbor: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy. 1982.

A collection of articles by J. Comer, Gordon Berry, Ossie Davis and others. The topics discuss blacks and various issues in the television industry.

London, K. with Caparulo, F. *Who Am I? Who Are You ?* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1983.

Offers practical advice about how to recognize, express and cope with emotions. It is a reassuring guide to help one identify and understand why and how you feel the way you do.

Tarvis, Carol. *Anger—The Misunderstood Emotion* , New York: 1982.

This book questions popular beliefs about anger and its influence in our lives. She explains why people get mad and uses current research from the social and biological sciences.

Winn, Marie. *Children Without Childhood* . New York: Pantheon Books. 1983.

The main thesis is that the boundary between children and adults is blurred. She states that the crucial determinants of lost innocence are divorce, two working parents and the social events of the 60's.

Bibliography for Students

Cohen, Susan and Daniel. *Teenage Stress* . New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc. 1984.

Stress seems to be a popular, current topic. The authors present many accounts of stressful situations that concern teenagers. By understanding stress one is able to develop ways to control it.

Laiken, D.S. and Schneider, Alan J. *Listen to Me, I'm Angry* . New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books. 1980.

In a straightforward and readable way the author discusses how to recognize and accept angry feelings and suggests constructive ways to express them. The final chapter is on coping.

LeShan, Eda. *You and Your Feelings* . New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975.

This book discusses the problems of teenagers with family, friends, school and specifically issues with dating, sex, alcohol and drugs. She says that feelings affect the way you think about yourself, other people, and the way you behave.

Segal, Zelda. "How to Handle Anger," *Seventeen* , June, 1982, p. 128.

This is a straightforward article about expressing anger which then gives guidelines on how to handle anger more effectively.

Materials for the Classroom

London, K. with Caparulo, F. *Who Am I? Who Are You ?* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 1983.

Offers practical advice about how to recognize, express and cope with emotions. It's a reassuring guide to help one identify and understand why and how you feel the way you do.

Three Films on Sexual Decision-Making:

Are We Still Going to the Movies? Color, 16 mm, 14 min.

A Matter of Respect Color, 16 mm, 18 min.

Running My Way Color, 16 mm, 27 min.

All of these movies are current, excellent films about the issues and conflicts surrounding adolescent sexual decision-making. They focus on many sensitive issues, conflicting societal messages, parental denials, peer pressures, and personal values and decisions confronting teenagers. I have chosen these films as a way of talking about conflict because they are appropriate in the Family Life program. Films dealing with other areas of adolescent conflict are also available.

Films may be borrowed from the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut, 129 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT. 865-0595. An annotated listing is available and films may be previewed at 129 Whitney by pre-arrangement.

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