

Aggression Replacement Training: A Viable Alternative

Ellen McGinnis

Schools have widely used suspension and related punitive practices, in spite of their proven ineffectiveness. This article discusses the role of Aggression Replacement Training as part of a schoolwide positive behavior support initiative.

Fourteen-year-old Sam is sitting in the principal's office again. His clothes are disheveled, the result of a physical altercation with a peer before school began for the day. He sits with his eyes downcast, his head resting on his arm, waiting for the inevitable. He knows he will be suspended again, and he knows there is nothing he can do about it. When the principal calls Sam into his office, he reminds him of his past disruptive behavior and the fight he had with another classmate just two months ago. "Why didn't you learn from your other suspensions?" he asks. "Well, perhaps you'll learn from this one," he states in frustration. Sam is suspended this time for 10 days, as this is his second fight.

Why didn't Sam learn from his past suspension? Why doesn't suspension work for the thousands of students removed from classrooms and schools each day for disruptive and aggressive acts?

Suspension Doesn't Work

Exclusionary practices remain the primary way that schools deal with student disruption, aggression, and violence. The problem is that such practices fail to work in the long run. There is considerable evidence that suspension and other forms of traditional punishment are ineffective in producing long-term change (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998). These practices do not prevent or deter future misconduct for students with chronic or intense behavior problems. On the contrary, what we do know is that suspension often exacerbates the very behaviors we are trying to extinguish (Mendler & Curwin, 1999). Long-term, negative outcomes of suspension have also been re-

peatedly found, including poor academic achievement, grade retention, negative feelings about school, truancy, and dropping out (Dupper & Bosch, 1996; Bock, Tapscott, & Savner, 1998). Students themselves have reported that suspensions were "not at all" helpful (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). These are interesting findings with our current stated commitment to "No Child Left Behind"!

Suspension and exclusionary practices are increasingly not viewed as favorable options, as research suggests that these practices are targeted toward minority students and those with disabilities on a disproportionate basis. These students are more likely to be suspended than non-minority students and are disciplined more severely for minor disciplinary infractions (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Applied Research Center, 1999; Advancement Project, 2000; Cartledge, 2003). Furthermore, the positive relationship between school attendance and academic success has been well documented, encouraging the examination of the relationship of school suspension to academic achievement (Andrews, Taylor, Martin, & Slate, 1998). Thus, we see a cycle emerge. The more a student is excluded from school, the more likely he is to fall behind academically. And because it is more acceptable to act bad than it is to act stupid (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002), a student is more likely to act disruptively and aggressively to avoid work that is not understood. It makes sense that students who are not in school will fail to learn what they need to learn. For minority students and those with disabilities, it is also likely that the achievement gap will continue.

With the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Educa-

tion, 2002), schools are being called upon to demonstrate academic achievement for all students, including those with behavior problems and other special needs. Despite the varied concerns regarding this legislation, schools obtaining federal funding under this act are required to comply with the mandate or to face a series of sanctions. Therefore, it would behoove schools to look at evidence-based alternatives that have more promise to keep students in school.

Considering what we know about the negative impact of exclusionary practices, why do schools maintain this practice? Why do we continue to use policies and procedures that fail to create the desired change needed for all students to succeed?

During the past two decades, the concern about school safety was escalated by highly publicized violence in schools across the country. At this time schools increased their efforts to address the issue of youth violence, and a large percentage of schools developed zero tolerance policies for firearms and weapons, alcohol and drugs, or for students who acted out in violent ways. By 1997, 90% of our nation's schools had developed a school or district policy with a predetermined set of punishments for firearms or weapons, 88% had such policies for drugs, and over three fourths of our schools had policies for violent acts (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In the first report of its kind, *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General* was released in response to the Columbine High School tragedy (Youth Violence, 2001). This report concluded that schools are relatively safe when compared to homes and neighborhoods.

While zero tolerance policies may appear to serve a useful purpose in removing students deemed "dangerous" and in discouraging violent acts in school environments, such policies have been found to be grossly misused. Zero tolerance policies have been criticized for racial disparity, punishing minority students more severely than white students, and suspending or expelling students for trivial reasons, such as the possession of cough drops or nail files (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). While some reviews related to reasons for suspensions found that most resulted from physical confrontations (Dupper & Bosch, 1996), others such as Vavrus and Cole (2002) have found that suspensions often occurred in the absence of aggressive acts. These results have led some to conclude that zero tolerance policies are in place for the symbolic value of reassuring the community that safe and orderly environments will prevail, rather than for their effectiveness (Noguera, 1995).

Many believe, however, that educators typically do truly want to do what is best for students. It is not unusual to hear administrators state that they "are only following the district's discipline policy." Perhaps, instead, it is the allure of a quick fix, the hope that punishment in the form of re-

peated suspensions, such as in the case of Sam, will miraculously begin to work. When getting tough does not work, we often think that getting tougher will. Referring to punishing procedures, including suspension, Goldstein, Glick, and Gibbs (1998) state:

...because these strategies often succeed in the short term, the punisher believes they work, which in turn encourages the use of more punitive measures. The one punished perceives from the use of punishment that "might makes right" and becomes that much more likely to pass this message on (p. 20).

Markey, Markey, Quant, Santelli, and Turnbull (2002) offer another viewpoint to this dilemma, stating that, by using suspension, "schools are sending the message that behaviors will be controlled or the student will not be allowed to participate" (p. 219). And in the worst case scenario, exclusionary policies may be misused, encouraging those who make trouble, or who are believed will not succeed anyway, to leave school altogether (Bowditch, 1993). Indeed, this may be the case when suspensions are used as a response to minor infractions and are not reserved for serious ones. Such a scenario is also likely to occur if the school climate is unwelcoming and nonrewarding. As we learned with time-out procedures, only if the environment is a reinforcing one, will the student actually experience "time-out." As stated by Horner, Sugai, and Horner (2000),

Unfortunately, a strong and consistent policy of punishment and exclusion for behavior problems without a balanced system of teaching and rewarding expected behaviors actually is associated with increases in aggression, vandalism, truancy and dropouts. Making schools less pleasant places for disruptive students has not proven to be an effective approach for reducing dangerous and disruptive acts. (p. 22)

It is important that schools not be helpless victims to behavior problems in the school setting, but instead, establish proactive interventions to teach alternatives.

The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 includes an "Unsafe School Choice Option" allowing parents to "remove their children from a dangerous or distressing school setting." Reducing students' concerns for their safety will allow them to better concentrate on their studies and thus improve their academic achievement" (U. S. Department of Education, 2002, p.177). Failing to implement effective strategies to deal with the behavioral needs of students, holding tight to practices and policies that fail so many of our young people, is sure to hasten the failure of our public schools. We must remember that suspension is a policy action, a pun-

isher, a short-term, reactive measure that will not have long-term benefit (Skiba, Peterson, Boone, & Fontanini, 2000); it is not an intervention. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) refer to suspension and expulsion as a "one-dimensional" approach. Its goal is to extinguish a behavior. However, it offers no process for the student to build a repertoire of acceptable, replacement behaviors.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It is a community expectation that educators implement effective practices (Jackson & Panyan, 2002). These expectations apply to interventions designed to address behavioral concerns as well as academic instruction. In the Surgeon General's report on youth violence (Youth Violence, 2002), evidence-based programs designed to prevent the onset of violence were recommended. For educators, this suggests that we must stop relying on practices and policies that fail to work. It suggests that we turn our attention instead to non-punitive instructional practices that are well grounded in theory and research. One such practice is Positive Behavior Support planning, which offers a meaningful process to address behavioral concerns in our schools.

Positive Behavioral Support Planning (PBS)

The Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports has established a model to build the capacity of schools to address the needs of all students (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Instead of being a curricula or program, PBS is a framework for addressing the full continuum of student needs, from those with mild issues to those students with intense and stable problematic behavior. This model includes a set of processes or strategies to foster social learning and to prevent problem behaviors. In addition, PBS provides a useful framework for coordinating school interventions and programs in a meaningful and unifying way.

The PBS continuum of supports is characterized by three levels. The first, **Primary Prevention**, is directed toward meeting the needs of the majority of the school population (80%). Students in this group do not have serious behavior problems, as they typically possess the internal controls and social behaviors to react in acceptable ways. However, given certain circumstances (e.g., lack of classroom management, negative school climate, lack of supervision), this group may act out. The need at this level is for universal interventions or schoolwide systems that target all students and staff. The goal is to minimize the predictable problems, so that more time and effort can be directed toward more severe behaviors. Primary prevention helps schools establish a positive school climate that provides a base for higher level interventions to succeed.

Secondary Prevention provides a system of behavioral supports for students with at-risk behaviors. This group has not responded sufficiently to primary prevention efforts and may comprise 15% of our student population. At this level, it is necessary to assess the needs of students and to select more intense interventions. Students in this group may move into a higher level on the continuum if the environment remains unresponsive and fails to meet their needs.

Finally, **Tertiary Prevention**, or an individualized system, is necessary for students (5%) whose patterns of behavior are more intense and chronic. Interventions at this level must be prescriptive in nature. That is, they must be designed to teach and reinforce behaviors that replace the undesirable or aggressive patterns.

PBS provides a specific set of team-based collaborative strategies needed for each of the prevention levels (refer to www.pbis.org for additional information). This structure provides utility for educators for other important reasons. First, the PBS continuum provides a way to unify our practices. Classroom teachers have often expressed concern regarding the variety of initiatives or programs that they are expected to implement. Schools may implement character education and other behavioral initiatives, yet fail to explain how such programs relate to each other. Educators, parents, and the community must see that the selected interventions provided for students along the PBS continuum form a unified set of practices geared toward meeting the needs of all students in the school. Placing our ongoing intervention efforts along the PBS continuum furthermore allows us to see where there are gaps in interventions. If schools institute only strategies at the primary prevention level, for example, and these are the extent of the efforts, there is a significant group of youngsters whose needs are ignored.

If a program fails to bring about the promised changes, it is understandable that educators are reluctant to take on still another initiative. One of our challenges is to match the intensity of interventions to the intensity of student need. A mismatch will likely lead to failure of the intervention (Sprague & Walker, 2000). Students who face repeated suspensions due to repeated acts of verbal and physical aggression need intense interventions that are logically related toward the problematic behavior. Aggression Replacement Training holds the promise of a successful alternative that directly addresses the problematic behaviors that resulted in the suspension.

Aggression Replacement Training

Aggression Replacement Training (ART) (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998) has been applied in a variety of environments, including schools, and in a variety of ways. From class-wide guidance activities to more frequent and rigor-

ous instruction for those with chronic behavior problems, ART has been used across the PBS continuum.

There is evidence to support that the ART program results in skill acquisition, increased anger control, and enhanced moral reasoning. For example, Jones (1990) found a decrease in aggressive incidents and impulsivity and an increase in coping incidents, self-control, and prosocial behaviors. In addition, investigations have found an overall reduction of acting-out behaviors and an increased level of community functioning, even when applied in settings with chronically aggressive adolescents (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998).

Recognizing that aggression has multiple causes, both external (peers, parents, settings) and internal (lack of social skills, impulsivity and poor anger control, and a low or primitive level of moral reasoning), these researchers have developed a multimodal program to address aggression. The three components of ART include: Skillstreaming, Anger Control Training, and Moral Reasoning.

Skillstreaming, a behavioral approach to teaching prosocial skills, is drawn from social learning theory, a theory pioneered by Albert Bandura (1973) and taken to a larger audience by Arnold Goldstein (Goldstein, 1973, 1981; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997; McGinnis & Goldstein, 2003). Its processes focus on four direct instruction principles of learning—modeling, role-playing, feedback, and transfer. These same learning procedures have been used to teach a variety of behaviors, from academic competencies to sports, daily living skills, and vocational skills. They are applied in Skillstreaming to teach individual, desirable social behaviors. More specifically, in ART, students learn what to do instead of aggression.

Anger Control Training (Feindler & Ecton, 1986) is the second component of ART. Developed by Eva Feindler and based on the earlier work of Navaco (1975) and Meichenbaum (1977), this part of ART directly teaches students to respond to provocation, not with anger, but rather with a series of other responses. Students learn to respond to:

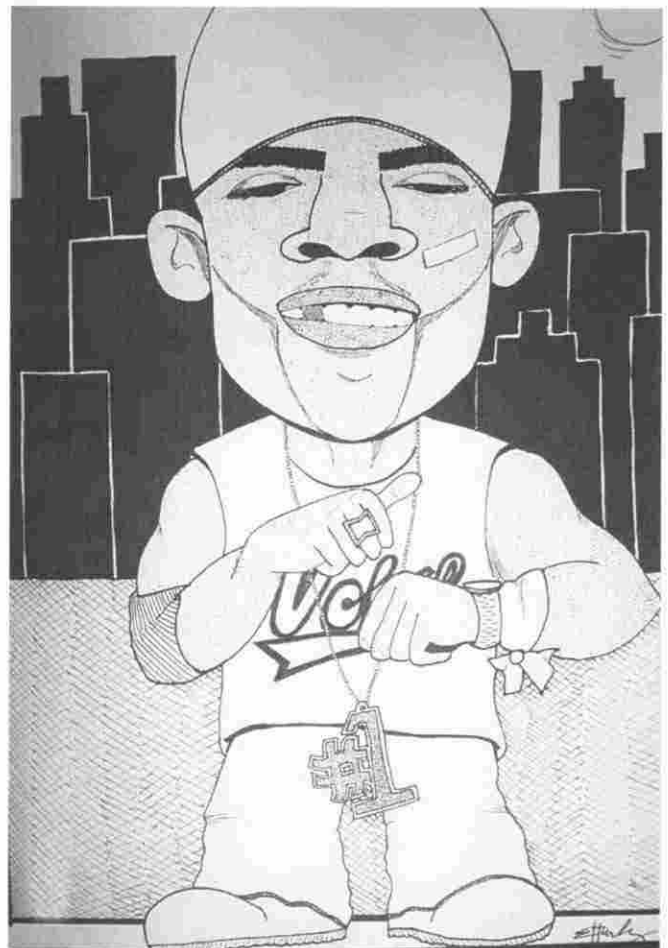
- a) external events or internal interpretation that elicit the anger response (triggers)
- b) physiological sensations of anger (cues)
- c) strategies to reduce the arousal of anger (reducers)
- d) self-statements to reinterpret and defuse internal triggers (reminders)
- e) using an appropriate Skillstreaming skill instead of aggression
- f) self-evaluation of use of the anger control sequence

Moral Reasoning Training, the third ART intervention, is based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1973). Presented with a series of moral dilem-

mas, students are exposed to the thinking of others in the group who possess differing levels of moral reasoning. Through this process, students progress their level of moral reasoning to that of the higher level peers.

Application

Aggression Replacement Training is a complex intervention designed to address the complex nature of youth aggression. Schools may select to implement this strategy for students who regularly face disciplinary action due to aggression. Aggressive youth may be assigned to an ART class as a regular part of their school day (i.e., in lieu of an elective or wheel class). For a student who has committed a violent act and who has been suspended, parental participation in an evening ART class for parents could be required. This class teaches parents the ART skills so they can reinforce and model the skills their child is learning. When parents attend classes, the length of the student's suspension is often reduced. This practice is instituted to create motivation for parents to attend the class, and often they do. Most parents welcome the opportunity to be



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involved and to influence their child's return to school, in addition to helping their child become more successful in dealing with aggression.

Staff development for teachers and others in the school environment (custodians, support staff) is also important in order to support the target student's attempts at implementing ART in real life school classrooms and hallways. In addition to learning the specific behaviors to prompt and reinforce, the school staff also learn to become more effective models for their students.

Although ART is geared primarily toward those students who have difficulty handling their aggression in school and is perhaps most useful at the secondary and tertiary levels of the PBS continuum, it is recognized that others may struggle with handling aggression in their private lives. ART is an appropriate and useful strategy for these students as well.

In whatever capacity the school decides to implement ART, it is critical that the school and district policies support its use. Schools must have the direction and the support to implement interventions that teach students alternatives to aggression in whatever form that may be. District policies must be supportive of the practices that we know to work and must serve as a guide for our actions. While short-term suspension for aggression may be a necessary first step, resolution must not cease with this action. Instead, educators must realize that aggressive acts often effectively serve to meet legitimate needs of the child. School discipline policies, therefore, must be designed not only to reduce undesired behavior, but to promote the display of socially appropriate alternative responses. The adoption of such policies could serve as a major impetus for true school reform and for the promotion of both academic and social successes for all students (Grant & Van Acker, 2000).

Summary

Suspension is a widely used practice in our public schools and has been a policy reaction to both minor and aggressive student behaviors. The long-term negative impact of the repeated use of suspensions is well documented. Through exclusionary consequences such as suspension, students like Sam, who need more, actually get less. Evidence-based alternatives, such as Aggression Replacement Training, are readily available and will produce positive and more durable results for the Sams in our world. Grounded in theory and research, ART focuses on the proactive teaching of acceptable behaviors to replace actions of aggression, uses strategies to teach anger control, and further enhances students' moral development. School policies and procedures must reflect what we know about punishing consequences, such as suspension, and

encourage and support the implementation of successful prevention and intervention strategies along the full continuum of student need.

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