

Anger Control Training as a therapeutic tool for a student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Asperger Syndrome)

Students diagnosed with ASD have greater or lesser difficulties in emotional and social competencies, communication, and cognitive-behavioral functioning. Every day, parents and caregivers, as well as specialists working with their children, make every effort to improve functioning of their pupils in everyday life. As Attwood (2012, p. 146) writes, „considering the difficulties experienced by people with Asperger Syndrome in social thinking, empathy, conversational skills and different learning styles, as well as their heightened sensory sensitivity, it can undoubtedly be stated that they are exposed to severe stress, anxiety, frustration and emotional exhaustion.” Therefore, in many cases, the sphere of emotional competences proves to be one of the most urgent areas of therapeutic work with an autistic child.

With regard to emotional functioning, one of the most important, although not the easiest, areas of therapeutic work with autistic people of different ages, is learning to recognize, regulate and communicate their own emotions in a socially acceptable manner. As Winczura (2011, p. 67) argues, most children with autism “display simple feelings such as anger, fear, joy and sadness, with fear being the strongest. However, most of these expressed emotions are characterized by a certain dysfunction. Children often do this inappropriately to the situation, definitely differently than we are used to”. Attwood, in turn, writes about the expression of emotions by children with AS: „Children with AS conceal their emotions until they are no longer able to control them. Frustration, apprehension or embarrassment becomes so intense that it is expressed through agitated behavior” (Attwood, 2012, pp. 149-150).

Another competence, considerably more complex to teach, is recognizing the perspective of other people (theory of mind). Yet another emotional and social skill greatly needed by children on the spectrum is predicting the consequences of their own and other people's actions. Anger Control Training fits perfectly into this overall picture. Conducted in a positive atmosphere by supportive and qualified trainers, it enables participants to develop their emotional awareness and supports their learning to predict the effects of their own actions. Anger Control Training (ACT) teaches participants to recognize bodily signals of anger, release it in a socially acceptable way through reducers, and express this emotion with respect for themselves and others.

While training, participants may make mistakes, which are a natural part of the learning process. With the support of an adult, trainees learn to cope with feelings of failure and to notice

and correct their mistakes under the guidance of a specialist. In this way, ACT supports participants in learning to cope with failure, practice mindfulness and self-correct errors, all of which are challenging skills for many people on the autism spectrum. By encouraging reflection on one's own behavior and teaching self-control, ACT may also help improve executive functions that are impaired in children with ASD.

It is also worth mentioning that many children on the autism spectrum are diagnosed with interoception disorders. Interoception is one of the human senses that enables a person to perceive signals coming from inside the body, such as hunger, satiety, tiredness, heartbeat and pain. Difficulties in this area may cause an autistic child not to register early signals of hunger, tiredness or increasing emotional tension. In practice, this often leads to situations in which, because the child has overlooked the first signals of sensory overload, stress or tiredness, uncontrolled outbursts of anger occur, or even somatic complaints such as headaches or stomachaches appear (Zwoniarska, 2026). As mentioned above, Anger Control Training teaches recognition of bodily signals of increasing emotional tension and may therefore support development of interoceptive awareness in many children on the autism spectrum, with a beneficial effect on their everyday functioning.

It should also be emphasized that the structure of ACT itself appears almost tailor-made for the therapeutic needs of a child on the autism spectrum. Because the entire training is divided into steps, the child can independently follow the current stage of the training, which provides a sense of safety and predictability. The content to be covered within each step has been described very specifically by the method's creators. This allows the trainer to define easily the goals the child is expected to achieve at each stage and to plan the sessions step by step so that the pupil can reach those goals. The pupil, in turn, receives clear instructions concerning the tasks to be completed at every stage of training, together with the trainer's support throughout the process. The child's work pace is important information for the trainer, who can adapt the session content so that the training process progresses at an appropriate rate. However, if for any reason, such as feeling unwell, the child is unable to cover the content planned for a given step during a single session, the process may be extended over time according to the child's current needs and abilities. Once the step has been completed, the process can continue. All of this allows the participant to feel safe during the training and to experience success, in a calm atmosphere, at a level suited to their abilities.

It can therefore be clearly seen that Anger Control Training enables people on the autism spectrum to develop many emotional and social skills in which they experience deficits, while the structure and organization of the training process correspond to the needs of this group. All this suggests that Anger Control Training may be a very good and effective therapeutic tool for the

target group described.

Anger Control Training for children on the Autism Spectrum Diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome: proposed adaptations and practical guidelines

Undoubtedly, therapeutic work with children on the autism spectrum (AS) using the ACT method requires the trainer to adapt the environment and expectations to the participant's developmental needs and abilities. It is important to limit elements that distract the child and to adapt both the form and the content of communication so that the sessions are varied and interesting for the child. Visual materials and aids that engage several senses at the same time, such as videos, illustrations, boards and educational cards, are valuable because they help people on the autism spectrum focus their attention and understand the content presented. During sessions devoted to anger reducers, relaxation music, stress balls and other sensory aids or props may also be used to support the child's acquisition of the information presented. Table 1 below contains the author's list of ideas, including suggested activities and teaching aids for use at each level of the ACT sequence.

With regard to the format of the sessions, the author believes that individual sessions are the most suitable way of conducting Anger Control Training for children on the autism spectrum. There are several reasons for this. First, this format allows the trainer to devote full attention to the child's needs and adapt the pace of work to the child's individual abilities. Individual sessions also allow the trainer to give the child more time to reflect and clarify doubts about newly introduced content. Finally, individual sessions are more predictable for the child than group sessions, which is of fundamental importance to people on the autism spectrum. An adult trainer is considerably more predictable in their behavior than the child's peers.

At each stage of the training, it is also important to apply the principle of two-stage information delivery. First, the trainer should help the child understand the content of a given step; then the child should be given time to reflect and an opportunity to choose the option that feels most relevant. For example, in the second step (bodily signals) the child should first be introduced to how other people may experience anger in their bodies and only then be asked: "Where do you feel anger in your body? Is it similar for you?" This gives the child a point of reference as a basis for reflecting on the experience of anger in their own body. Learning about other people's perspectives may encourage the child to share their own experiences and observations, which benefits the development of communication competencies. Finally, learning about different points of view has an educational dimension: by discovering how other people perceive, experience and express emotions, the child learns to recognize and name different phenomena and to express both their

thoughts and anger in a socially acceptable manner.

Table 1. Proposed psychoeducational activities and teaching aids for Anger Control Training sessions with a student on the autism spectrum (AS) at the early primary education stage, ages 7-9. Source: Author's own work.

ANGER CONTROL TRAINING STEP	PROPOSED PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND TEACHING AIDS	
	<i>External triggers</i>	<i>Internal triggers</i>
<i>STEP 1</i> <i>External and internal triggers</i>	- illustrations, boards, cards and educational videos presenting situations that may make the child angry; - a worksheet containing a graphic representation of situations with captions and blank space for the participant's own suggestions; the child marks with an "X" those situations that usually make them angry.	-flashcards containing the most common thoughts that make people angry; - an educational board on which the child can place selected flashcards and add other examples of thoughts that intensify anger.
<i>STEP 2</i> <i>BODILY SIGNALS</i>	-educational books, therapeutic stories and an educational video about how people can feel anger in their bodies; - an educational board or dry-erase board with an illustration or drawing of a standing child with an angry facial expression, dry-erase markers or red circular stickers for indicating places in the body where anger may be felt.	
<i>STEP 3</i> <i>Reducers</i>	- educational books, therapeutic stories and an educational video about reducing emotional tension in the body, together with sensory aids and relaxation music; - a board showing examples of situations that most often make the child angry and flashcards with reducer	

	suggestions, for example „Close your eyes and breathe,” which the child matches to specific situations on the board. The child may also create additional flashcards with other reducer ideas.	
<i>STEP 4</i> <i>Positive thoughts</i>	- a “box of supportive thoughts” containing flashcards with examples of thoughts that may provide support when anger is experienced; - a board with space for attaching the flashcards selected by the child.	
<i>STEP 5</i> <i>Aggression consequences</i>	- educational books, therapeutic stories, an educational video and educational cards about the consequences of aggression; - a game in which the child completes the phrase “If I were aggressive in this situation, then...” with the help of flashcards containing true and false statements about the consequences of aggressive behavior.	
<i>STEP 6</i> <i>Self-evaluation</i>	<i>Self-assessment</i>	<i>Self-reward</i>
	- educational books and cards that shape and develop positive self-assessment skills; - completing, with the trainer's help, sentences written on a board: “During the training, I managed to...” and “Next time, I will try to do it differently...”	- a therapeutic story about rewarding oneself; a box of flashcards containing example self-rewarding phrases, such as “I am proud of myself,” and suggestions for prosocial forms of self-reward agreed in advance with the child's parents; - a board with space for attaching flashcards selected by the child.

In accordance with the principles of the ACT method and the rules of therapeutic work with a child on the autism spectrum, the training process should proceed in „small steps”. This means that during one session the participant learns only one step of the anger-control sequence. The trainer uses language that is clear and understandable to the child and aims to formulate short,

unambiguous messages. In addition, the modeling presented by the trainer should concern situations that may realistically occur in the child's life and form part of their everyday functioning. Examples of situations that may make a child angry include losing a favorite water bottle at school, arguing with a classmate, or having to tidy a messy room following a parent's instruction. It is important that the situations presented are familiar and authentic to the participant.

Another important aspect is providing feedback to the child. When working with people on the autism spectrum, it is extremely important to strengthen their motivation positively, for example through verbal praise. This principle should also be remembered during ACT sessions. In addition to giving the child concise and clear feedback at the end of the training, the trainer should positively reinforce the participant at other points during the session, with a frequency adapted to the child's individual needs. Training sessions should create positive associations for the child. It is therefore an essential responsibility of the trainer to ensure a positive atmosphere in which a relationship can be established between the trainer and the participant. This relationship is the foundation of therapeutic work with a child on the autism spectrum, regardless of the type or format of the sessions or the methods used by the instructor. For example, at the end of an annual cycle of sessions, and with the consent of the child's parent or guardian, the trainer may organize an outing for ice cream, a board-game session or, if the child enjoys it, a sensory session using nature sounds, a star projector and a comfortable space created for relaxation.

Work with a child on the autism spectrum also requires ongoing cooperation with the child's parents or guardians. During regular meetings, the trainer should have an opportunity to discuss the child's current progress and difficulties, answer the parents' questions, make necessary arrangements and, where needed, support caregivers with helpful advice or words of encouragement. One important matter to agree with the child's parents is the set of rewards the participant may give themselves in the final step of Anger Control Training. Rewards should be agreed with the parents sufficiently in advance, before the child learns this step during the sessions and begins practicing it as part of the so-called „homework”. The trainer should be able to contact the child's parent whenever the situation requires it, just as a teacher or class tutor would during the school year.

As already noted, the use of visual materials during training is recommended because they help people on the autism spectrum focus their attention and understand the content presented. Annex No. 1 contains a proposed graphic set of cards that may be used during training sessions with the target group described. The set consists of eight cards illustrating the successive ACT steps, with Steps 1 and 6 each represented by two cards. Every card contains the name of the step, together with text, either a question or a declarative sentence, and a graphic related to the content discussed in that step. The cards may be printed in a large format and attached to a

board or wall so that they remain visible to the child throughout the session. Importantly, the cards should be displayed in accordance with the current course and stage of the sessions. During the first session, only the card illustrating the first ACT step, external triggers, is displayed; during the next session, the internal triggers card is added. At each subsequent session, as the child learns the next steps of the sequence, the trainer adds further cards to the display. In this way, a visual presentation of the steps is created that helps the child remember the structure of the training and facilitates the training process. The card design was developed by certified ART trainer Cecylia Bieganska, MA, and was graphically modified by the author of this thesis with the trainer's permission.

Appendix No. 1. A set of cards illustrating the sequence of steps in Anger Control Training. Source: Prepared based on a design by certified TZA-ART trainer Cecylia Bieganska.

~1~

**WHAT MADE
ME ANGRY?**

EXTERNAL TRIGGER



~1~

**WHAT DO I
THINK WHEN I
FEEL ANGRY?**

INTERNAL TRIGGER



~2~

**WHERE IN MY
BODY DO I
FEEL ANGER?**

BODILY SIGNALS



~3~

I CALM MY BODY

REDUCERS



~4~

I CALM MY THOUGHTS

POSITIVE THOUGHTS



~5~

**I THINK WHAT
WOULD
HAPPENS
IF...?**

AGGRESSION CONSEQUENCES



~6~

**WHAT WAS
GOOD?**

**WHAT CAN I DO
DIFFERENTLY?**

SELF-ASSESSMENT



~6~

HOW WILL I REWARD MYSELF?

SELF-REWARD

