TOOLS FOR GETTING ALONG

Teaching Students to Problem Solve

(A curriculum)

INTRODUCTION

Discipline is one of the most universal and troubling problems that elementary and secondary school teachers face every day. Although most discipline problems are classified as some form of disruption, defiance, or inattention (Tulley & Chiu, 1995), even more serious behaviors can occur at alarming rates (Langdon, 1997). Inappropriate reactions to social situations frequently interrupt the learning process for the student and for others sharing the same educational setting, requiring more extensive instructional and management procedures from teachers. Clearly, teachers need interventions they can implement within their regular classroom routines to help all children negotiate their social environments effectively.

Children in regular education settings who are particularly at risk for antisocial behavior patterns should receive support no later than the 4th-6th grades to maximize their potential for socially acceptable behaviors. When teachers implement effective teaching strategies within the general education classroom, they help all children learn positive behaviors, and those who need the most help benefit from interaction with their socially appropriate peers.

To help address the need for positive intervention, the staff of the Aggression Intervention Research Project at the University of Florida (UF) developed ***Tools for Getting Along****: Teaching Students to Problem Solve*. It is a teacher-friendly, self-contained curriculum designed to help upper elementary school children learn positive, appropriate coping strategies when faced with frustrating or challenging social situations.

Tools for Getting Along goals include:

- √ gaining a better understanding of anger and how it may lead to or exacerbate social problems.
- √ learning how to recognize and manage anger.
- √ learning to use problem-solving steps to generate, implement, and evaluate solutions to social problems.

These goals are intended to help prevent destructive behavior patterns from developing and ultimately, reduce unnecessary referrals to special education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Researchers suggest that the incidence of aggressive, uncontrolled behavior has increased dramatically during the past few decades, and childhood aggression accounts for a disproportionate number of referrals to special education (e.g., Kauffman, 1997). The behavior patterns of aggressive students tend to remain stable over time and are predictive of later aggression and a variety of negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (Bierman, 1986). Further, aggressive behavior is the single most important reason for children to be rejected by peers (Coie, Underwood, & Lochman, 1991), and childhood peer rejection also correlates with multiple forms of adolescent maladjustment (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990.

To remediate inappropriate behaviors, teachers have traditionally relied on programs that incorporate external rewards for more appropriate student responses (Kauffman, 1997).

It was first suggested in the 1970s, however, that words direct mental operations, which in turn control behavior that can be directed at solving a problem. Early theorists such as Mahoney (1974) and Meichenbaum (1977) argued that cognition is vital in explaining complex behavior patterns such as aggression. Work by Dodge and others (see e.g., Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge & Somberg, 1987) demonstrated that aggressive children, when compared to typical peers, tend to misinterpret social cues and display other cognitive deficits such as *limited problem-solving ability* and impulsive social decision making.

Since the 1970s and 80s, studies using Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions (CBI) (see Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group [CPPRG], 1999; Daunic, Smith, & Miller, 2002; Robinson, Smith, & Miller, 2002) show that teaching aggressive students new cognitive strategies can decrease aggression and impulsive behavior and strengthen pro-social responses. CBI thus combines the principles of behavior therapy, such as modeling, feedback, and reinforcement, along with cognitive awareness training which includes teaching students to think out loud to help them build new ways of coping with difficult situations (Kendall, 1993). The approach used for teaching the ***Tools for Getting Along*** curriculum is based on this work.

DEVELOPMENT OF ***TOOLS FOR GETTING ALONG***

We developed the ***Tools for Getting Along*** curriculum by adapting materials used previously by our research team on a number of research initiatives. The initial version of ***Tools for Getting Along*** contained 15 lessons covering understanding and handling anger, effective communication, introductory relaxation techniques, and problem-solving skills. To engage the relationship between internal cognitive events and overt behavior and teach the cognitive processes associated with effective problem solving, we incorporated role-plays and teacher modeling. The use of students' personal experiences was also incorporated to help students generalize skills learned in the classroom to daily life.

Pilot and Review Process

We piloted the15-lesson ***Tools for Getting Along*** in two 4th grade general education classrooms in Alachua County, Florida. Although feedback about the content, appeal to students, and ease of use was generally positive, teachers made suggestions about the lessons, terminology, format, and length. We incorporated appropriate changes, rechecked vocabulary for age-appropriateness, and enhanced the visual appeal of the student worksheets.

Tools for Getting Along was then used in 19 high-risk 4th and 5th grade classrooms, again soliciting input from participating teachers. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that the lessons were easy to follow, were appropriate for their students, and contained valuable information. Students particularly enjoyed the role-play opportunities, and many teachers reported having generated lively discussions about students' own experiences. We created five more lessons of structured role-plays based on the assumption that students need repeated behavioral practice to become proficient problem solvers. Thus, ***Tools…*** now contains a total of 20 core lessons, including five role-play lessons that supplement the instruction.

More recently, we developed six booster lessons that also supplement and reinforce the core 20 lesson ***Tools…*** curriculum, to be implemented at 1-2 week intervals following completion of the initial lessons.

THE CURRICULUM

Tools for Getting Along should be taught twice per week, with each lesson lasting approximately 30-40 minutes. The first lesson includes an overview of the general problem-solving approach. Subsequent lessons are devoted to teaching each of 6 problem-solving steps.

Step 1 (Lessons 2-4): I know I'm angry. Recognizing that a problem exists is a necessary first step in any problem-solving skill sequence. In ***Tools for Getting Along***, problem recognition includes recognizing anger in oneself and others and understanding how anger and frustration can create and/or exacerbate problems.

Step 2 (Lessons 5-7): I calm down. Step 2 strategies are designed to prevent the escalation of frustration and anger and to engage students' cognition (i.e., "calm down and think").

Step 3 (Lesson 8): I think about the cause. In Step 3, students learn to define the problem in terms of goals and barriers. They are encouraged to think of a barrier as something they have some control over rather than placing the "blame" on another person.

Step 4 (Lessons 9-12): I think about what I could do. This step and the one that follows represent the essence of skillful problem solving and probably require the most practice. The main idea is to help students realize there is more than one possible solution to most problems, and giving themselves time to think may help prevent acting on the first, often unproductive, thing that pops into their head.

Step 5 (Lessons 13-16): I try a solution. In this step, teachers ask students to think about what would happen if they implemented each choice they generated in Step 4, asking what would be the best, worst, and mostly likely consequences of each.

Step 6 (Lessons 17-20): I think about how it turned out. In the final problem-solving step, teachers ask students to evaluate whether their choice was a good one for accomplishing their goals. If it was, they can congratulate themselves on good problem solving. If it was not, they can try to determine whether they simply did not carry out their decision well enough or whether their choice was not a good one.

Curriculum Features

The *goal* of ***Tools for Getting Along*** is for students *to learn the six problem-solving steps*, use them as self-statements to guide decision-making, and eventually use them automatically, as they become more proficient in problem solving when confronted with challenging social situations at school and elsewhere. To facilitate this goal,

- √ each lesson begins with a specific problem-solving step and suggested objectives.
- √ teacher and student instructions, along with suggested discussion material, are presented in consistent type style and size for easy recognition.
- √ each lesson progresses through a cumulative review, teacher presentation of new material, and opportunities for guided and independent practice.
- √ representation of each overhead transparency is furnished in the text to facilitate recognition/selection.
- √ a copy of each student worksheet follows the explicit instructions that accompany it.

We provide materials in this loose-leaf, three-ring binder so that extra copies can be made if necessary and student/class materials can be inserted as appropriate. (Note: A separate workbook containing all worksheets and Tool Kits can be furnished to each student.)

In addition, throughout ***Tools for Getting Along*** are features to facilitate generalization of the problem-solving strategies:

- √ Paired or Small-Group Learning: Students can share responsibility for learning the problem-solving strategies by working in small groups (two or three per group). Groups should include students with differing levels of social skill development and reading ability.

- √ Tool Kit: The Tool Kit is a self-monitoring device that can also be used to help students practice the strategies they learn. A Tool Kit is provided at the end of the first lesson as well as each of the lessons that conclude one of the six problem-solving steps (seven total). Each Kit begins with questions about material learned previously, provides students an opportunity to apply the problem-solving step just completed, and includes skill practice that builds on prior learning. Most important, the Tool Kit should facilitate the application of strategies to real life situations.

- √ Point System: The point system also aids generalization. By rewarding completion of the Tool Kit and cooperation with others, teachers can reinforce students for generalizing the cognitive skills they are learning during the lessons. We encourage teachers to incorporate the point system into their regular classroom procedures.

- √ Cognitive Modeling: Teachers are asked to model problem-solving steps as they teach the curriculum. As they relate any "real-life" instance in which they solved a problem of their own, they can "think out loud" to demonstrate how they used each step, thus modeling how the steps generalize to realistic situations.

Booster Lessons

In addition to the 20 lessons that form the core ***Tools…*** curriculum, there are six booster lessons to be taught approximately once a week following completion of the 20-lesson core. These lessons serve to review and reinforce student skills and provide extended exposure to the problem-solving sequence.

- √ Booster Lesson 1 consists of a general review of the problem-solving steps and the rationale for using problem solving in social conflict situations. Students complete a Tool Kit Revisited as guided practice.

- √ In Booster Lesson 2, students act out scripted role-plays for the class. Multiple role-plays provide students opportunities for behavioral practice, and teachers are encouraged to repeat the role-plays if desired.

- √ In Booster Lessons 3 and 4, teachers divide students into small groups and have them design their own role-plays based on their ideas and/or experiences, and then act them out for the class.

- √ In Booster Lessons 5 and 6, students volunteer to share a real life problem for the class. Then the class, as a group, helps each student solve the problems discussed. Volunteers are instructed to report to the class during the next ***Tools…*** booster lesson about how the chosen strategies worked.

SUMMARY

We hope you find ***Tools for Getting Along*** easy to implement and enjoyable for you and your students. Most importantly, we hope this curriculum establishes a positive, cooperative classroom atmosphere and enables your students to become more self-reliant, effective, proactive problem solvers as they encounter the social challenges that are part of their developing years. We encourage you to continue teaching and reinforcing ***Tools…*** throughout the school year, and we invite you to contact the Aggression Intervention Research Project if you have questions or comments.

THANK YOU!

REFERENCES

Bierman, K. L. (1986). The relation between social aggression and peer rejection in middle childhood. *Advances in behavioral assessment of children and families, 2*, 151-178.

Coie, J. D., Underwood, M., & Lochman, J. E. (1991). Programmatic intervention with aggressive children in the school setting. In D. J. Pepler, K. H. Rubin et al. (Eds.), *Development and treatment of childhood aggression* (pp. 389-410). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (CPPRG). (1999). Initial impact of the Fast Track prevention trial for conduct problems: I. The high-risk sample. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67*(5), 631-647.

Daunic, A.P., Smith, S.W., & Miller, M.D. (2002). *Teaching students problem-solving to counter aggression: Findings from two years of research*. Unpublished Manuscript.

Dodge, K. A., & Frame, C. (1982). Social cognitive biases and deficits in aggressive boys. *Child Development, 53*, 620-635.

Dodge, K. A., & Somberg, D. (1987). Hostile attributional biases among aggressive boys as exacerbated under conditions of threat to self. *Child Development, 58*, 213-224.

Kauffman, J.M. (1997). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (6th ed.) Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Kendall, P. C. (1993). Cognitive-behavioral therapies with youth: Guiding theory, current status, and emerging developments. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 61,* 235-247.

Kupersmidt, J. B., Coie, J. D., & Dodge, K. A. (1990). The role of poor peer relationships in the development of disorder. In S. R. Asher & J. D. Coie (Eds.), *Peer rejection in childhood* (pp. 274-305). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Langdon, C.A. (1997). The fourth Phi Kappa poll of teachers' attitudes toward public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *79*, 212-220.

Mahoney, M. J. (1974). *Cognition and behavior modification*. Cambridge: Ballinger.

Meichenbaum, D. H. (1977). *Cognitive-behavior modification: An integrative approach*. New York: Plenum Press.

Robinson, T. R., Smith, S. W., & Miller, M. D. (2002). Effect of a cognitive behavioral intervention on responses to anger by middle school students with chronic behavior problems. *Behavioral Disorders*, *27*(3), 256-271.

Tulley, M., & Chiu, L.H. (1995). Student teachers and classroom discipline. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *83*(3), 164-171.