

Tools for Getting Along

Introduction

Researchers have shown that 20 to 25 percent of students may be considered at risk for developing some kind of behavioral problem during their school years (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). Moreover, associated academic and social deficits increase the risk of poor relationships with peers and teachers and can lead to social rejection (Bierman, 2004). Students who are rejected by peers at an early age, often because of aggression, are at increased risk of later antisocial behaviors. In addition, inappropriate social reactions such as aggression can interrupt the learning process for all students who share an educational setting, and thus they necessitate effective instructional and management procedures (Smith, Taylor, Barnes, & Daunic, 2012). Clearly, teachers need preventive 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 socially appropriate peers.

For over 20 years, the Cognitive Behavioral Research Group at the University of Florida (UF) has developed, piloted, and rigorously studied *Tools for Getting Along: Teaching Students to Problem Solve*, 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:

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

These goals are intended to help prevent destructive behavior patterns such as aggression 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., Smith, Lochman & Daunic, 2005). 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 (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusché, 2004; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Further, aggressive behavior is the single most important reason for children to be rejected by peers (Bierman, 2004), and childhood peer rejection also correlates with multiple forms of adolescent maladjustment (Dodge et al., 2003).

To remediate inappropriate behaviors, teachers have traditionally relied on programs that incorporate external rewards for more appropriate student responses (Alberto & Troutman, 2012; Polsgrove & Smith, 2004). It was first suggested in the 1970s, however, that thoughts direct mental operations, which in turn control behavior 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. Early 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 Smith & Daunic, 2006; Smith et al., 2012) show that teaching aggressive students new cognitive strategies can decrease aggression and impulsive behavior and strengthen pro-social responses. CBIs thus combine the principles of behavior therapy, such as modeling, feedback, and reinforcement, and cognitive awareness training that includes teaching students to think out loud and build new ways of coping with difficult situations. 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 several 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 included to help students generalize skills learned in the classroom to daily life.

Pilot and Review Process

We initially piloted the 15-lesson *Tools for Getting Along* in nineteen 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 curriculum's visual appeal.

Following the initial piloting, we created five more lessons of structured role-plays and six booster lessons, based on teacher feedback and the assumption that students need repeated behavioral practice to become proficient problem solvers. Thus, *Tools for Getting Along* contains a total of 20 core lessons, including five role-play lessons that supplement the instruction, and six booster lessons to be implemented at 1-2 week intervals following completion of the initial lessons. These boosters reinforce learning and provide opportunities to practice skills in real-world contexts.

Since our initial development activities, *Tools for Getting Along* has been implemented with over 2,000 students in approximately 60 4th and 5th grade classrooms across multiple elementary schools. Findings from rigorous research studies have indicated that *Tools for Getting Along* has positive effects on students' social problem solving, behavior (specifically aggression), teacher-reported executive function, and student-reported

anger and anger management (Daunic et al., 2006; Daunic et al., 2012; Smith et al. 2014).

Of note is that *Tools for Getting Along* is now included in the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP), US Department of Health & Human Services. NREPP is a searchable online registry of mental health and substance abuse interventions that have been reviewed and rated by independent reviewers.

A randomized controlled trial of the *Tools for Getting Along* curriculum was reviewed by the US Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and rated as meeting WWC evidence standards without reservations. The study found that students who received the curriculum had statistically significantly greater use of rational problem-solving styles than students who did not receive the curriculum.

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 six 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 are likely to require the most practice. The 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 most likely consequence 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 slide shown by the teacher is furnished in the text to facilitate recognition/selection.

 a copy of each student worksheet follows the explicit instructions that accompany it.


Throughout *Tools for Getting Along*, the following features 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 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 for Getting Along* 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 for Getting Along* throughout the school year, and we invite you to contact the Cognitive-Behavioral Research Group at UF (<http://education.ufl.edu/cognitive-behavioral-research-group/>) if you have questions or comments.

Thank you!

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