Anger Management Group Design for Middle School Students

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Abstract:

This paper is a design for a ten-week anger-management skills group for Middle School students. The literature supports this work in the schools (Bidgood, Wilkie, & Katchaluba, 2010; Currie, n.d.; Feindler & Engel, 2011; Hall, Rushing, & Owens, 2009; Sportsman, Carlson, & Githrie, 2010). Many benefits of group work within this topic will be discussed, such as the modeling and reinforcement of new behaviors (Feindler & Engel, 2011) and the potential to work through anger between group members (Currie, n.d.; Lanza, 2006). The group begins with one introduction session, followed by three addressing anger arousal, three teaching different behavioral responses to anger, and three addressing cognitive changes. The group makes use of individual examination and growth within the context and help of group growth and activities.
Anger Management Group Design for Middle School Students

This group plan is for a group teaching anger management skills and is designed for use by a school counselor working with Middle School students. The plan addresses anger arousal, behavioral changes, and cognitive change suggestions for students addressing their anger. This plan emphasizes personal reflection, with members keeping their own journal and working to find their own personally effective methods. Group discussion is utilized, as well as role playing, movement exercises, and homework assignments, particularly those with a trusted adult. Assessment is designed to measure both comprehension of the material and behavioral changes in the students. The design makes use of a pre-group interview and ten sessions, with limited resources used so that it can be used with groups even with limited funding.

Rationale

Group work is a commonly used form of therapy and counseling, especially within the schools where counselors’ time must be used effectively (Erford, 2010). Anger management issues are commonly reported in schools, and thus it is important for school counselors to be prepared to lead groups helping students learn and implement proper anger management skills (Bidgood, Wilkie, & Katchaluba, 2010; Currie, n.d.; Feindler & Engel, 2011; Hall, Rushing, & Owens, 2009; Sportsman, Carlson, & Githrie, 2010). A rich history of conflict resolution work in groups provides a strong basis for this type of work and population, as well as a wealth of activities, guidelines, and measures to draw from.

Choosing a group-format for anger-management training or therapy offers many advantages over individual work and therapy. Feindler and Engel (2011) discuss that the group provides a venue for modeling of behaviors and also creates a situation for positive social behavior changes to be reinforced vicariously as other group member progress. As Trotzer (2006) discusses, the group forms a model of society, and members can gain feedback from
others as a model of how they will in the world outside of therapy. This huge advantage over individual work is especially important in anger management as the group process allows for anger expressed within the group to become a source of material the group. These experiences can be used to enhance the growth of group members, as well as create opportunities for members to be coached through angry moments by leaders of group members (Currie, n.d.)

Bauman (2011) gives another suggestion for using real anger within the group by starting groups for mandated members by inviting the expression of anger at having to be in the group. This provides a realistic and bonding theme in which members can invest in, which can create enthusiasm which can be used to get started teaching how one can truly accomplish their goals when angry. Lanza (2006), an experienced conflict resolution group leader, shares that in her first group with a co-leader she became angry with that leader and did not handle it appropriately. The group processed this event and the members grew a great deal in feeling a kinship with the leaders in their struggles, as well as seeing a real life example of how people with more appropriate conflict resolution skills handled the situation. This example of rich interpersonal observations and related growth cannot happen in individual therapy.

The group process creates benefits for its members that can aid in the learning and changing process for members who are struggling with anger management. Groups become a close community offering support, encouragement, a sense of belonging, and much feedback. (Lanza, 2006; Sportsman, Carlson, & Githrie, 2010). Some groups will also provide a boost in self-esteem as members work together to solve problems and generate solutions to their real-life situations (Hall, Rushing, & Owens, 2009).

Three main goals are generally implemented in anger management training: developing awareness and understanding of anger triggers and experiences, increased understanding and
control over one’s thought process, and gaining new behavioral strategies to use in anger-provoking situations (“Chapter 9,” 1996; Feindler & Engel, 2011; Sportsman; Carlson, & Githrie, 2010). Most groups spend several sessions on each of these three areas, as does this group design.

While anger management groups for adults suggest a maximum number of ten members, this group will also take into account group sizes by age, which suggest that for middle school aged children, four to six group members are recommended (“Chapter 9,” 1996; Trotzer, 2006).

**Group Design**

**Population**

This group is designed for the students of Glenwood Middle School, identified by self or others as needing help in anger management.

**Members and Selection**

The group will have four to six members, gathering members from referrals by principals and teachers, as well as self-referrals. Teachers will be especially encouraged to refer students who commonly are in trouble for yelling, physical violence, and other anger-related classroom disruptions. The group will be announced on morning announcements for one week, inviting participation for students who want to learn how to express anger, or to do so more appropriately. Any interested students will be invited to write their name on a sheet of paper in an envelope on the door of the guidance counselor’s office. Teachers and principals will be invited to share names during staff meetings.

Once a list of interested students has been collected, a parent and guardian consent form will be sent home for each student’s participation in the group. Screening interviews will begin for students as consent forms are returned. If more students are interested than groups can be
accommodated for, students will be put on a wait list on a need-based order; those with the highest pre-test scores for anger management skills will be asked to wait until another group is run. Screening interviews will consist of pre-test measures (see Appendix A), an explanation of the goals of the group and a discussion with the student of how this group may fit their needs, and, finally, a discussion of the rules and student’s signature of commitment to follow them during the group as well as informed consent for the group process.

Any obvious needs of the group not met by the group plan will be added before the beginning of the group. Any individuals who demonstrate severe difficulties or problems that do not fit within the group will be met with individually to address those issues or to plan for referral to an outside agency. Students who do not feel comfortable committing to the group will also be worked with on an individual basis.

Leaders

While ideally the group would be led by co-leaders, the school environment likely has only one available and trained counselor, thus this group can be led by one School Counselor. If any other employee is trained in counseling and group work and could consistently co-lead the group (such as a school psychologist, school counseling intern) that would be an advantage to the group’s process.

Goals

The goals of the group are (1) to increase students understanding of their anger arousal, both triggers, and the physiological experiences. (2) To help students recognize, learn, and implement behaviors that are most effective when dealing with anger. (3) To change the way students talk to themselves about and during anger.
**Time Line**

The group will have 10 meetings. The first will be an introduction to the group, the next three sessions will address anger arousal, the following three will address behavioral changes that can be made, and the final three sessions will address cognitive interventions, with a focus on reviewing and closing the group.

The meetings will be on a Tuesday or Wednesday, consistently for ten weeks during the eighth bell period, which is a study hall for all students. In this way, students will be able to be a part of group without missing an academic class.

**Facilities**

This group will meet in the school counselor’s office, if it is large enough, or an empty classroom (The health room and music rooms are commonly available during this hour. The music room would be preferable given that it has chairs that can be easily moved).

**Equipment and Supplies**

Supplies will be limited, based on the common funding in schools. If the room is not equipped with a black board, a large pad of paper and easel will be required for some sessions. Small notebooks for each member to have as a journal are the only other needed supplies.

**Measures**

Similar measures will be given before and after the group, so that changes can be measured. Both a Likert-scale rating of different anger management techniques, and qualitative questions will be given to measure growth in understanding of anger. An evaluation will also be given during the last session. These three sets of questions can be found in Appendix A. Discipline referrals and incidents will be collected from teachers and principals before and after the group.
Informal interviews with teachers will also be conducted to note differences in student during and after the group work.

**General Group Process**

Each session is 45 minutes long (The length of the class period). Groups will generally follow the following format:

1. **Check In and Rule Review:** Minutes 1-5. Each member will share how their day has been, as well as review the rules of the group.
2. **Review of Homework:** Minutes 5-10. Members will share about their homework from the previous week.
3. **Main Activity:** Minutes 10-40: This time will be the focus of each session, where the main activity and summary of that work is done.
4. **Homework:** Minutes 40-45: This last few minutes gives times for instructions for the homework for next week, and a brief transition time so students can prepare to go home or for after school activities.

The Group Rules will begin as follows, and will be added to during the interview process if members wish to add a rule:

1. **Respect others**
2. **No put-downs** (Treat others as you want to be treated)
3. **No names when discussing a situation**
4. **Confidentiality:** what happens in this group stays here. Including all stories told by any member or leader.
5. **Right to pass:** After giving an answer for the check in question, members can pass on other questions or activities.
Session Guide

Session One

Objective: Members will get to know each other, the group process, and begin to explore their anger experiences.

Check In and Rule Review: This section of the group will remain constant for each meeting: Group members will go around the circle and read out loud the rules of the group. This session will then introduce the check in activity: giving a number 1-7 (one being the worst and seven the best) for how they are doing and a one word explanation of why. Group members can ask follow up questions if they choose.

Main Activity: This session will have several activities as the group gets started. The first is “two truths and a story.” Each member will share three “facts” about themselves, one of which is untrue. Members will guess which is untrue. This will give members a chance to share and get to know one another in a light-hearted way. The group will then discuss that anger is good; the leader will share that the group isn’t about not being angry, but is about using anger correctly. The group will brainstorm ways anger can be a good thing (anger at unjust situations can provide motivation; anger can help us stick up for ourselves; etc.) Members will then have a couple of minutes to record the things they usually do or say when they are angry, and share how well they work. We will discuss that the group will be to teach us different ways to (and how to) manage our anger so we can meet our goals.

Homework: Begin anger journal. For this week, students will record situations in which they feel angry and what they notice about the ways they acted and how well those things worked for them. The journal will be used for much of the group, and entries will become more detailed as more skills are acquired.
Session Two

**Objective:** Students will identify their specific anger triggers.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Students will each share one thing they did when angry (yelling, throwing things, etc.) and if it helped or hurt them getting what they wanted.

**Main Activity:** This discussion based session will help members identify specific triggers to their anger. One member will share a situation in which they got angry. The group will work together to find specifics that prompted anger (not “school” made them angry, but that they feel angry when students bump in to them in the hall way). After one example, students will have five minutes on their own to brainstorm specifics about what makes them angry. The group will share the specifics and members will create a list of their own, to be put in their journal.

**Homework:** Members will journal about noticing their anger cues, and paying attention to what happens in their body when they feel angry.

Session Three

**Objective:** Members will learn about their body’s responses to anger.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Students will each share one thing they did when angry (yelling, throwing things, etc.), and if it helped or hurt them getting what they wanted.

**Main Activity:** As a continuation of journal sharing, students will share what they noticed about their body when they became angry (one member will record all responses on a black board or easel and paper. Members will then take part in an activity where they record how angry they feel after different exercises (thinking of something that makes them angry, doing jumping jacks, yelling) to show that anger happens in our bodies as well as our minds.
**Homework:** Members will again journal about anger, and note if they are able to recognize their bodies changing, and if this changes their reactions to the situations.

**Session Four**

**Objective:** Students will learn both the long and short forms of muscle tension-relaxation.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Students will share about any other physiological changes they noticed, and if any situation was different due to them noticing their anger.

**Main Activity:** This session will be focused on teaching tension-relaxation techniques. The first fifteen minutes will lead student through an entire body relaxation session, and then the group will process how this feels different than feeling anger and how difficult or easy it would be to feel angry when they are relaxed. Students will then discuss a shortened version of this exercise that can be used in situations when there are triggers present or when one is feeling angry. This relaxation exercise adapted from Nelson-Jones (2009).

**Homework:** Students will be asked to practice this shortened relaxation technique three times when they are not angry, and write down how they felt about it.

**Session Five**

**Objective:** Students will learn how to express their anger appropriately.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Members will share how many times they practiced the relaxation, and how it went for them.

**Main Activity:** This week, and the next, the sessions will be focused on role-playing appropriate anger expression. See Appendix B for the full role play. Students will watch the leader demonstrate a four part assertion message, and then discuss what they liked and did not like, as
well as any questions they have. They will work on picking a situation they would like to practice in the role-play, and develop their own four-part message. They will be read out loud and improved by the group, and then role plays will begin for any time left over.

**Homework:** Students will be asked to practice this role play out loud with a trusted adult, and get feedback on how the adult would respond to that message, rather than the messages the students had previously sent in anger.

**Session Six**

**Objective:** Students will practice expressing anger appropriately and recognize the benefits of this type of behavior over inappropriate expression of anger.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Members will reflect on their experience with the role play, and be asked to focus on the feedback given, and which adult response they would prefer.

**Main Activity:** This week will focus on each student practicing the role plays. Each member will get a chance to practice their assertion message, and how to respond to other’s responses to them. The group will give feedback.

**Homework:** This week, members will be encouraged to try using their new skill in a situation where they feel angry or frustrated. If they are able, journaling about it and recording any frustrations or questions will be requested. Students will also be asked to research different ways of handling anger, or interviewing an adult about how they handle their anger.

**Session Seven**

**Objective:** Students will develop a list of options for behaviors to use when addressing anger.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.
**Homework Review:** Members will share about if they had a chance to use their four-part assertion message in real life, and how it went.

**Main Activity:** This week’s discussion will then be focused on creating a list of other things than can be done in the face of anger: counting to ten, self-talk (although this will not be elaborated on), leaving the situation, or asking an adult for help. Members will pick one they would like to try, and practice it (do jumping jacks and think of something anger-provoking, count to ten and calm down; role-playing asking a teacher to leave the room so he or she can calm down). At the end of the session, members will record their list of favorite techniques in their journal.

**Homework:** This week members will be asked to create a list of things they would want to be told in a time of anger, if a friend was there to coach them through it.

**Session Eight:**

**Objective:** Students will recognize self-talk and its role in anger.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Members will be asked to share their top three statements they would want to be told by a friend/coach.

**Main Activity:** Members will role-play different situations from their anger journal, while another group member coaches them with the role-playing student’s own chosen statements. After each member has the chance to role play, the group will discuss how it is different with a coach and what it had been like if the coach had been encouraging their anger (as their self-talk usually does). The leader will then discuss how we can be our own coach by controlling our own self talk. The leader will provide a set of common anger-management statements for the group.
**Homework:** Members will be asked to list things they used to say to themselves when angry, and a list of new things they will use as self-talk when they feel angry. As always, they will be encouraged to try this if possible.

**Session Nine:**

**Objective:** Students will review material covered in the group and recognize their competence in managing anger.

**Check In:** Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

**Homework Review:** Members will report the self-talk statements they selected and, if they were able to use them, what effects they had.

**Main Activity:** As a review activity, the leader will present a situation similar to the lives of the students. (For example, Jim has been getting into a lot of trouble in math class lately. Mike, who sits next to him in geometry, always calls him “Jimmy,” which Jim doesn’t want to be called. How could Jim handle this?). Members can brainstorm and review each of the techniques practiced in the group and the leader can prompt discussion of any methods the members are not recalling. This activity adapted from the Solving Problems Together model (Hall, Rushing, & Owens, 2009).

**Homework:** As the final homework, students will be asked to write a letter to themselves, encouraging and reminding their future-self of what they have learned in the group and why it is important to control their anger. The leader will keep the letters, and monitor the members’ behavior after the group ends and send them as students begin to struggle with anger again, or at the end of the school year if anger doesn’t become an issue again.
Session Ten:

Objective: Students will gain closure for the group process and complete closing measures and evaluations.

Check In: Review Rules, Share 1-7 and one word.

Homework Review: Students will not be asked to share their letters, but will turn them in and share about what they felt like while writing them.

Main Activity: The final session will start with a discussion about how members feel about ending the group, any concerns they have, and how they felt about the group. They will then complete their post-group measures and the evaluation (see Appendix A). All members will be presented with a certificate for completing the group, and cookies will be provided to celebrate.
References


### Appendix A

#### Measures for Pre- and Post-Group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Not Usually</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>Almost Always</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I get angry, I stop to think before I respond.</td>
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<td>When I am mad, I feel lots of energy and have no control over it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I yell at others so they know when I am mad.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I get angry, I know lots of different ways to handle it.</td>
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<td>I use a 4 part message to express my anger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I am angry, I work on relaxing my body.</td>
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<td>I do my best to safely leave a situation when I can’t control my anger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I will talk to adult if I am having a problem with my anger.</td>
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</table>

1. When I am angry, three things I know I should do are:

2. Three of my anger triggers are:

3. The best way to tell someone I am angry is…

4. Name at least two things you notice about your body when you feel angry:

5. When I am angry, something I say to myself is:

6. Evaluation questions, for post group:

7. What was your favorite thing about this group?

8. What was your least- favorite thing?

9. What would you like to change about the group?

10. Would you recommend this group to other students?
Appendix B

Expressing Anger Appropriately Assertion Plan

Four Step Assertion Message:

1. When you… (what the other person does)
2. The effects are…(what happens to you)
3. I feel… (your emotion: sad, angry, frustrated, hurt).
4. I want…(an apology, the other person to stop a behavior)

If the person you are talking to does not agree, address their concerns and repeat the last two steps!

Key Aspects:

- Tone of voice
  - Firm, not aggressive or passive
  - When you say you are angry or sad, you can sound angry or sad (that is honest!)
- Non Verbal Behavior
  - Stand tall
  - Make eye contact
  - Remain still (try to avoid fidgeting)