

Group Play Therapy:  
Anger Management for Elementary School Children  
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Abstract

Children who cannot effectively deal with their anger present serious problems for their teachers. Counselors have found that play therapy can be a successful intervention for such children, but research on group play therapy is meager. This study involves the use of group play therapy in small groups for anger management with kindergarten and first grade students.

## Group Play Therapy:

### Anger Management for Elementary School Children

As a second-year elementary school counselor, working at the kindergarten and first-grade level, the author has noticed that more teachers refer students for small group counseling due to poor anger management than for any other reason. This seems understandable. In classroom guidance for children 5 to 7 years old, counselors normally teach awareness of emotions. These children are just beginning to try to integrate their feelings into their concepts of self.

In so doing, a child often finds a particular difficulty with anger. From infancy the child may have experienced negative reactions from caregivers upon any display of anger. Such reactions confuse the child, for whom the expression of happiness or sadness has consistently evoked a positive, nurturing response (Landreth & Sweeney, 1997). Thus, the infant, feeling dependent on the external evaluation of her anger, resorts to repression, denial, and self-doubt. This in turn leads to low self-esteem and an inability to deal with angry feelings (Landreth & Sweeney).

### Significance of the Problem

Poor anger management results in disruptive behavior in the classroom. School administrators often describe the primary purpose of school counseling as the removal of social and emotional obstacles to learning. Of all such obstacles, inappropriate expressions of anger may be the most significant. Teaching and learning cannot take place while a student or students are hitting other students, throwing objects across the room, or screaming defiance at the instructor's directions.

## Literature Review

School counselors differ from other professional and community counselors in terms of their clientele (young children) and their work environment (the school). When counseling children, an elementary school counselor must take developmental factors into account (Landreth, 1991). Children below the age of 10 or 11 especially need to be physically active. Play therapy (or play counseling) provides the outlet children need for such activity. For developmental reasons, children at these early ages communicate better through play than verbally (Landreth). "Play is the child's natural medium of self-expression" (Axline, 1947). Thus, the school counselor needs to use this medium in order to communicate with her clients (Landreth). As Landreth has stated,

Play therapy is defined as a dynamic interpersonal relationship between a child and a therapist trained in play therapy procedures who provides selected play materials and facilitates the development of a safe relationship for the child to fully express and explore self (feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors) through the child's natural medium of communication, play (p. 14).

The world of the young child is primarily nonverbal, sensory, and tactile. Play counseling allows the counselor to enter the world of the child as opposed to requiring the child to fit into his world (Sweeney & Homeyer, 1999). Play counseling is appropriate for use in elementary schools with kindergartners and first graders. Children aged 5 to 7 are preoperational (Myrick, 1987). They learn through their activities (White & Flynt, 1999).

Aggressive children can benefit from play counseling (Johnson & Chuck, 2001). Such a child can use toys to express strong negative feelings. She can transfer her anger to the toys rather than directing her anger at other children. The counselor, by tracking

and observing the play, can learn about the underlying causes of the aggressive behavior. The accepting behavior of the counselor can lead to a gradual reduction of the child's anger and to an enhancement of the ability of the child to control her anger (Johnson & Chuck, 2001).

Alfred Adler (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, Eds., 1956) believed that all humans are social creatures, and that a therapist must be able to envision his client within the context of the client's social environment. Adler further stated that "the dominant purpose of education" (p. 134) is to nurture the development of social interest. Although a discussion of the meaning of social interest is beyond the scope of this article, what Adler essentially meant is that social interest is an attitude based on empathy. A lack of social interest can cause feelings of inferiority, which in turn can lead to anger (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, Eds., 1956). Group play counseling enables an elementary school counselor to explore and promote children's social interest (White & Flynt, 1999).

Dreikurs and Cassel (1972) discuss four goals of a child's misbehavior: Attention seeking, power, revenge, and expectation of failure. If attention seeking fails, a child will often turn to a power struggle. If the power struggle fails, the child will often seek revenge. Children seeking revenge try to hurt others and display angry outbursts toward others. The peer group can help such a child. Through the peer group, the child can come to believe that her peers like her (Dreikurs & Cassel, 1972).

Most elementary school counselors use group counseling at least as much as other professional counselors (White & Flynt, 1999). The group setting enhances the relationship between the counselor and each child (Ginott, 1999). Group play counseling

aids socialization and social learning. Children see other behaviors modeled in the playroom, and the counselor encourages appropriate behavior (White & Flynt, 1999).

Nevertheless, group play counseling has a record of limited use. Little research on this intervention exists (Landreth, 1991). Accordingly, the research question for this project is: Can group play counseling lead to better anger management in young elementary school children?

#### Procedures and Methodology

The subjects in this study were kindergartners and first graders. The location of their elementary school is a suburban area near a large city in the southeastern United States. The children ranged in age from 5 to 7 (one of the subjects turned 8 just before the end of the study). The school counselor who conducted the study asked teachers for recommendations for three anger management groups. The teachers furnished 11 names. From this list, the counselor chose the seven students who, based upon his own experience as well as discussions with their teachers, had the most difficulty controlling their anger. He placed these seven students in two groups, one with three students, meeting every Monday, and the other with four students, meeting every Friday.

The Monday group included one female kindergartner and two male first graders. The female child was of mixed race (white and African-American). One of the male children was white and a Bosnian refugee. The other was African-American. After the second week, the female child transferred to another school. This group continued with two members for the duration of the study.

The Friday group included one kindergartner and three first graders. One of the first

graders was African-American. The other three children were white. All were male. After the first week, the African-American child withdrew because his parents did not consent to group counseling for the child. At the same time, by happenstance, a kindergarten teacher approached the counselor, and asked to add a child to this group. This child, a white female, joined in the second week, and the group continued intact through the duration of the study.

During the week prior to the beginning of the group sessions, the counselor sent a questionnaire (see Appendix) to the teachers of each participant. After the final session of each group, he sent an identical questionnaire to the teachers. The counselor compared the responses and discussed certain individual students with their teachers.

Each group play session lasted approximately 25 minutes. The counselor set up a play area in his office. The area of the play space was smaller than Landreth (1991) has recommended, but contained the types of toys needed to promote the children's expression of feelings (Landreth). The space included a sand tray (general emotional expression), a doll house (family issues), hand cuffs (control), a bop bag (expression of anger), drawing paper with crayons, pencils, and markers (creative expression), toy soldiers (aggression), a toy kitchen (nurturing), wooden blocks (creativity), a cash register (control), a pegboard (anger/aggression), a toy classroom (school issues), and toy cars, trucks, buses, and airplanes (exploration). There were also additional general expression toys, such as rubber balls, a magic wand, toy tools, and costume accessories. During each session, the counselor used a non-directive approach to verbally track the children's play, reflect their feelings, and encourage their decision-making.

## Results

The teachers returned all of the pre-group and post-group questionnaires. They answered all of the questionnaire items. Some of the teachers supplemented their responses with narrative remarks.

### *The Monday Group*

Data for the Monday group proved to be problematical. One of the members (the Bosnian refugee) was absent for the last two sessions. This means that he attended only four sessions. Because he missed the last two weeks of the group, the counselor initiated individual counseling sessions with this child. In most of these sessions, the counselor used play counseling. Also, due to his absences, there was only one group member for the last two sessions. Thus, that child received individual play counseling rather than group play counseling in those sessions. Whereas the counselor was able to use group play counseling six times with the Friday group, he was only able to use this intervention four times with the Monday group.

The Bosnian child (Subject 1A) showed dramatic improvement on the post-group questionnaire. Table 1 reveals the results of the pre-group questionnaire and the post-group questionnaire for this subject. The subsequent tables provide the same information for each of the other subjects. The Bosnian child's teacher also stated that she has seen a great improvement in his behavior. This child's angry behavior improved in every single aspect covered by the questionnaire. The other child (Subject 2A) showed much less improvement (see Table 2).

*The Friday Group*

The initial questionnaire for the kindergarten boy (Subject 1B) indicated that he almost constantly engaged in five of the nine angry behaviors. He rarely engaged in the other four. After the group, all five of the worst behaviors had improved. Table 3 shows that the most significant improvement occurred in the following behaviors: Losing his temper, throwing items out of anger, and talking back to the teacher.

The female kindergartner (Subject 2B) showed greatest improvement in talking back to the teacher. This behavior decreased from “sometimes” to “almost never.” She also showed improvement in six other behaviors also (see Table 4). There was no change in the frequency of her losing her temper or being sent to the principal’s or assistant principal’s office. No problem behavior increased in frequency following the group.

One of the first grade boys (Subject 3B) showed little improvement (see Table 5). This child, however, had the mildest anger management problems in this group. At the outset of the group, the child engaged in four of the behaviors “sometimes,” two of the behaviors “rarely,” and two of the behaviors “almost never.” Only one of the behaviors, being easily provoked to anger by others, occurred frequently prior to the group. After the group ended, the teacher reported that he still had a problem in this area.

By contrast, the other first grade boy (Subject 4B) showed the most improvement in the group. On the post-group questionnaire, his teacher even remarked that he had “made very good progress.” Table 6 shows that the most significant improvement occurred with regard to the following problems: Yelling at others, losing his temper, and hitting others.

In each table, there appears a category called “overall change.” This number

represents a mathematical computation based on the pre-group and post-group scales (1 to 5, where 1 = almost never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = almost constantly). It can possibly provide a quick snapshot of the effect of the overall group experience for each subject.

In order to derive this number, one need only subtract the numerical equivalent of the scaled responses for each of the nine items on the post-group questionnaire from that on the pre-group questionnaire. For example, Table 3 shows that Subject 1B, prior to the group, yelled at others almost constantly (numerical equivalent = 5). Following the group, Subject 1B engaged in this behavior frequently (numerical equivalent = 4). The difference is +1. Performing this same subtraction for each of the remaining eight items on the questionnaire yields a total numerical value of +10.

### Discussion

The results indicate that group play counseling can be helpful in reducing angry behavior in young children. All of the subjects in this study showed at least some improvement in managing their angry behavior. Subject 1A from the Monday group and Subjects 1B, 2B, and 4B from the Friday group improved the most. It is reasonable to say that the intervention achieved qualified success for four of the six participants. Moreover, although Subject 3B's behavior did not improve very much, he began the study with minimal anger management problems.

Obviously, other factors influenced the results. Participants in the Monday group received group play counseling only for four weeks, then received individual play counseling over the last two weeks of the study. It is certainly possible that the individual

play counseling was equally as responsible, or even more so, for the dramatically positive results in Subject 1A as was the group play counseling. During the course of the study, this child, whose family suffered many hardships, also received assistance and attention from social workers, refugee organizations, and school administrators. Developmentally, this child was the oldest, turning age 8 shortly before the study ended.

It is axiomatic to recognize that teacher interventions may have affected the outcome of the study. Teachers spent more time and effort with these children than anyone other than their families. This variable is particularly relevant to the Friday group. The participants in that group came from only one kindergarten class and one first grade class. Both of the teachers of the participants in the Friday group tend to be very proactive in working with the parents of children with problem behaviors. Thus, the contribution of the parents to the behavioral improvements is also an unknown factor.

On the other hand, teachers cannot devote very much special attention to troubled children. Under current legislation, they face challenging demands to cover an extensive academic curriculum in such a way as to maximize test scores. This process can be extremely time-consuming. The law also prohibits teachers from making modifications to address the needs of individual students unless the students have an ESOL or Special Education classification. Of the participants in the study, only Subject 1A (ESOL) fit into such a category.

In the school in which this research took place, administrators must deal with a rapidly increasing population of needy and troubled students while facing stringent budgetary dictates. Caseloads for social workers and refugee organizations in the district

vastly exceed their resources. This fact of life severely limits the time that they can devote to children such as Subject 1A.

What this means is that school counselors are in a better position than any other school personnel or community organizations to deliver effective interventions for children with behavioral problems. And the work of the school counselor in this regard is critical to the success of the school in achieving its academic goals. Nothing disrupts a classroom and distracts a teacher more than student misbehavior.

#### *Future Research Considerations*

It is difficult to achieve meaningful results in a study such as this in only six weeks. For example, mortality and absenteeism reduced the Monday group to only four sessions, calling into question the significance of the data for that group. In the Friday group, Subject 2B joined in the second week. She therefore participated in group play counseling for only five weeks. Future researchers may wish to plan a play counseling group with a duration of ten, or even twelve, weeks in order to guard against the effects of mortality and absenteeism.

Another way to counter the effects of mortality and absenteeism is to construct larger groups. In this particular study, larger groups did not seem to be a viable option. The play area in the counselor's office measured only approximately 100 square feet, which is smaller than the 150 to 200 square feet that Landreth (1991) recommends. To place more than four anger-challenged children in a play group in such a small space could have resulted in children stumbling over one another and the counselor with possible concomitant accidental injuries.

Pre-screening of participants is always a good idea when planning any counseling group. If a counselor wants to employ pre-screening of group members in an elementary school, she must begin planning the group far in advance. This is not always going to be possible. Early in the school year, neither counselors nor teachers generally know enough about the students to make informed judgments about appropriate group placement.

Furthermore, a modern developmental school guidance and counseling program emphasizes classroom guidance in order to provide preventive care to the most children possible. The traditional responsive services of small group and individual counseling remain important, but today's counselor has less time to devote to these activities. A counselor who wants to show the effectiveness of group play counseling must be ready to overcome inevitable scheduling obstacles. Of course, any elementary school counselor will assert that scheduling obstacles present themselves on a daily basis in every aspect of the counselor's work. Such problems are routine.

### Conclusion

This study has exciting ramifications for the use of group play counseling in the elementary schools. This author, a relative novice in the play counseling arena, nonetheless achieved remarkable results in many of the research participants. The study reinforces the unique contribution that school counselors make toward academic success. Effective behavioral interventions lead to more positive learning environments as well as better relationships between counselors and teachers, counselors and administrators, and counselors and parents.

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## Appendix

**Questionnaire**

Please circle the number that best describes the degree to which \_\_\_\_\_ engages in the following behaviors. 5 = almost constantly, 4 = frequently, 3 = sometimes, 2 = rarely, and 1 = almost never.

1. Yells at others	1	2	3	4	5
2. Hits others	1	2	3	4	5
3. Loses temper	1	2	3	4	5
4. Throws items out of anger	1	2	3	4	5
5. Talks back to teacher	1	2	3	4	5
6. Damages property out of anger	1	2	3	4	5
7. Easily provoked to anger by others	1	2	3	4	5
8. "Time out"	1	2	3	4	5
9. Sent to principal's or AP's office	1	2	3	4	5

Table 1

*Subject 1A*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	sometimes	almost never
Hits others	rarely	almost never
Loses temper	frequently	almost never
Throws items out of anger	rarely	almost never
Talks back to teacher	sometimes	rarely
Damages property out of anger	sometimes	almost never
Easily provoked to anger by others	frequently	rarely
Sent to "time out"	frequently	sometimes
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	frequently	almost never
Overall change = +16		

Table 2

*Subject 2A*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	frequently	frequently
Hits others	almost never	almost never
Loses temper	sometimes	frequently
Throws items out of anger	rarely	almost never
Talks back to teacher	frequently	sometimes
Damages property out of anger	sometimes	rarely
Easily provoked to anger by others	frequently	frequently
Sent to "time out"	frequently	sometimes
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	sometimes	sometimes
Overall change = +3		

Table 3

*Subject 1B*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	almost constantly	frequently
Hits others	rarely	rarely
Loses temper	almost constantly	sometimes
Throws items out of anger	almost constantly	rarely
Talks back to teacher	almost constantly	rarely
Damages property out of anger	rarely	almost never
Easily provoked to anger by others	almost constantly	frequently
Sent to "time out"	rarely	sometimes
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	rarely	rarely
Overall change = +10		

Table 4

*Subject 2B*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	frequently	sometimes
Hits others	frequently	sometimes
Loses temper	sometimes	sometimes
Throws items out of anger	rarely	almost never
Talks back to teacher	sometimes	almost never
Damages property out of anger	rarely	almost never
Easily provoked to anger by others	frequently	sometimes
Sent to "time out"	frequently	sometimes
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	sometimes	sometimes
Overall change = +8		

Table 5

*Subject 3B*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	sometimes	sometimes
Hits others	sometimes	almost never
Loses temper	sometimes	sometimes
Throws items out of anger	almost never	almost never
Talks back to teacher	rarely	almost never
Damages property out of anger	almost never	almost never
Easily provoked to anger by others	frequently	frequently
Sent to "time out"	sometimes	rarely
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	rarely	almost never
Overall change = +5		

Table 6

*Subject 4B*

	Pre-Group	Post-Group
Yells at others	frequently	rarely
Hits others	sometimes	almost never
Loses temper	frequently	rarely
Throws items out of anger	rarely	almost never
Talks back to teacher	rarely	almost never
Damages property out of anger	rarely	almost never
Easily provoked to anger by others	frequently	sometimes
Sent to "time out"	sometimes	rarely
Sent to principal's/assistant principal's office	rarely	rarely
Overall change = +11		