

# School-Based Aggression Replacement Training

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*Aggression Replacement Training (ART) is a potent K-12 intervention that responds to many of the developmental and natural needs of aggressive and antisocial students. Woven into the curriculum preventatively or as a stand-alone course in response to an antisocial school climate, ART facilitates the learning necessary to reach and provide lasting change for complex students.*

**T**here is a story told of a youngster walking a solitary beach at low tide, surrounded by thousands of stranded starfish. Desperately, as they lay baking in the afternoon sun, the young person worked quickly and deftly at picking up starfish, one after another, throwing them back into the water in an attempt to save their lives. A passerby called out, "How useless! You'll never get them all back in time! What difference does it make?" Without breaking his rescue rhythm, the youngster replied, "It made a difference for that one! But it matters to this one. And it matters to this one" (Eiseley, 1979).

Too large, too pervasive, and perhaps too painful is the task to change the tide for all of our struggling youth. It may be a popular view that "it's just not worth it" or "it's just too big a task." Certainly the low tide of our societal stresses and ills have abandoned many of our youngsters without the necessary "nutrients" or well-being skills related to success. Left unaided, underparented, under-skilled, and often raised in aggressive families, most lost youth are roaming our communities at risk for dangerous antisocial choices and leading lives with loose belonging and significance.

As educators, we must make a choice in our professional beliefs around our most challenging students. The essential questions are: Do schools evolve and respond to the real life challenges and needs of all of our students? Are the needs of aggressive students, at least in part, the responsibility of today's school programs? If we say yes, then we are responsible to seek strategies and interven-

tions that promote the developmental needs of these complex students. We must meet our students where they are: underdeveloped in life social skills, underdeveloped in anger and emotional control, and immature in moral reasoning. Our responsibility is to forward the competency and mastery of these difficult-to-teach students, in the belief that all children are worthy of the wide education that our communities can offer.

Those of us answering the call to teaching challenging students, youth often left behind in a sense, are most often working within agencies, schools, and facilities scheduled by mandated curriculum, tight time constraints, deadlines, and squeezed resources. We are asked to do more with less, and the complex needs that these students present often seem beyond the bounds of a regular school day.

As professionals, we are also challenged by our own sense of efficacy. Does what I do positively impact the lives of my students and therefore bring me a true sense of satisfaction? We entered the profession of education with the intentions and commitment to make a difference against the tide and to offer meaningful interventions that bring safety to these young people and our communities. Too often the work can appear to be too much because we have set our measurement of success on the academic gains made in teaching content in ways that make learning enjoyable and interesting. While this is a very worthy goal, what do we teach when students are disengaged from learning, have a history of non-success academically, and are highly charged in the trauma and chaos of their lives? Little of even superb teaching gymnastics will be the key

to making their lives better. Our best solution is to offer them the curriculum that meets their natural needs; we respond to where they are developmentally. Professional effectiveness must be redirected to measure our strength in providing potent opportunities for lasting pro-social change. We may not be able to do it all for everyone, but we can do it well for those who are primed and willing to change. A potent intervention well implemented will significantly impact the lives of aggressive students and, in so doing, will increase teachers' (and all educators') professional fulfillment. Our success will be measured in small wins—the individual experience of one student at a time empowered by a new skill, a new awareness of themselves and others, or an increased ability to manage their anger in a tough situation. The incremental positive steps forward with our students won't be large enough to make the evening news, but the win is no less monumental—and all the more reason that, as teachers, we must acknowledge and celebrate even the smallest progress forward. Each small contribution to their lives plays out for years to come as they have the courage to repair and reclaim their place in the community.

Aggression Replacement Training is a developmental approach to teaching core relationship skills and basic citizenship in a competency-based (versus deficit-based) framework (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1988). The ART framework addresses social learning across three domains: behavioral (Skillstreaming—social skills training), the emotional domain (anger control training), and the moral domain (moral reasoning). ART has been broadly researched over the years with consistently profound outcomes: fewer school suspensions, lower recidivism, and fewer juvenile arrests.

While Aggression Replacement Training has been useful with many older, chronically aggressive youth in juvenile facilities, there is profound potential to offer ART in our schools, both as a preventative and as an intervention, to decrease aggressive student behavior. The valuable and life-changing tools in ART can be an intentional tide-turning effort at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels.

## **Aggression Replacement Training as a School Aggression Prevention Initiative**

When we evaluate school climate in general, we examine the cohesive, inclusive, and student success elements, as well as ecological, physical, and social elements that inhibit safety and challenge optimum learning/teaching experiences for everyone. Students whose behavior is antisocial, and aggressive in particular, greatly challenge the overall success of a school community. Carefully positioned, Aggression Replacement Training can be widely adopted as an element within an overall strength-based

aggression prevention initiative. Many elementary and middle schools in particular offer Skillstreaming as a standard component of classroom group learning. The investment is in creating and maintaining the prosocial behaviors to ensure that all students are developmentally equipped with the interpersonal skills to be effective in small and large groups. This clearly is an effective way to guide a classroom of diverse students in behaving respectfully, effectively, and compassionately with one another. Particularly within the first few months of the school year when group cohesion and communication is being developed, many of the classroom survival skills, friendship-making skills, and the skills for dealing with feelings are particularly essential. For those students who need greater development socially, teachers and counselors typically create small group instruction in the anger control and moral reasoning sessions of ART. Prescriptively then, all students are included in learning, role-playing, and practicing pro-social skills throughout the year, and only the students with the greatest need receive the additional behavioral and moral reasoning sessions to deepen their social development.

Skillstreaming blends easily into a regularly scheduled group time within the school day, whether it is taught in a homeroom, morning meeting time, or class meeting activity. Learning the skills of getting along and being together are viewed as lifelong lessons and are often supported with practice in win/win problem solving, conflict resolution, and effective listening. At the elementary and middle school level, there are many, many opportunities to identify, discuss, and examine successful and challenging social learning situations, to include skills, anger/emotional control, and/or moral dilemmas. A conflict on the playground, issues current within the school or neighborhood, or a literature character in conflict are all natural and intriguing opportunities to apply prosocial responses to real life challenges. Whether these experiences are concluded with resolution and agreement is not as critical as making space and time for the students to think together on challenges, and that opportunity was available for all students to contribute safely and to examine their individual views in the group process.

## **Aggression Replacement Training as a School Aggression Intervention/Response Initiative**

For many schools, especially middle and secondary schools, where conflict, aggression, and/or a stressed school climate exists, Aggression Replacement Training has been incorporated into the school program to respond to the present and perhaps pervasive tide of antisocial student behavior. Students participate in all three components of ART, either on a voluntary (embedded in an existing class) or on an involuntary basis (as a condition of

external requirements).

For example, an 8- to 12-week version of ART is frequently blended into a required health, human psychology, or social sciences course, often complemented with additional course topics, such as active listening, positive problem solving, and healthy conflict resolution. Students are taught a number of essential skills and strategies to strengthen what may be weak or unpracticed. At the secondary levels, we see ART increasingly blended with skills and activities related to pre-employment experiences. As the literature suggests, our business communities are rating an employee's interpersonal and problem-solving skills as critical elements to employability and advancement opportunities. Again, the implementation of ART skills, strategies, and teaching language across all subject areas (full-school commitment) broadens the exposure and generalization experience for all students. For students to discuss the moral dilemmas found inside governmental political structures in a world government class and the prosocial/antisocial behavior of Shakespearean characters in literature class are examples of the kinds of ways that we raise the awareness, discuss the mastery, and encourage the generalization of citizen-centered living and tolerance at school.

In addition, many schools have used ART as a required or involuntary course within the school curriculum (for credit) or on-site as a condition of another external requirement (either for credit or noncredit). Instituted as mandatory within an in-school suspension program, as a condition of re-entering post suspension, or as an on-site required workshop (weekend or after school class) as a condition of juvenile probation, ART is structured as a means to completing preset conditions and/or as a form of restitution. By participating in learning prosocial alternatives to their past antisocial choices, students are re-entered into renewed standing.

Of critical importance to program success is the belief that positively completing ART is a means to restoring these students to full membership in the school community. The view is one of development and transformation, not punishment and dismembering students (Classen, 1996). In the full spirit of Restorative Justice, ART can be a tool to respond to the teachable moment created when a student offends against person(s) and/or property. Seen first as an offense against community (most particularly human relationships) and secondarily as a violation of rules or laws, restoration—returning to good standing—is possible if the needed skills and strategies are available and practiced and become within the reach and repertoire of the student.

Aggression Replacement Training complements other strength-based initiatives that many school districts are building into their efforts to increase holding power (re-

ducing student dropout rates), to increase cultural needs and belonging within communities, and to respond more directly to the employment goals of students. Such programs as the Search Institute's Developmental Assets, School-to-Work programs, and Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution programs all represent the shared goal of equipping young people with the skills, behaviors, and thinking strategies required in our world today (Search Institute, 2002). Students learning the skills related to human respect and dignity provide opportunities to engage the four essential and universal principles of nurturing youth as described by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2002) in the Circle of Courage, namely: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. What students learn and practice in ART facilitates strengthening in lasting relationships and belonging, skill mastery and social competence, greater independence and internal control, and awareness to perceive the needs of others and offer actions of generosity (Brendtro, Ness & Mitchell, 2001). Thus, ART is an essential building block for the wider growth and maturing we believe is necessary to develop in adolescence.

Aggression Replacement Training has great potential for meeting the necessary and developmental needs of students. The degree and depth that ART becomes transformative and lasting for a student depends on our ability as a school to implement the following essential elements:

- To articulate and structure ART as restorative instead of punitive
- To develop the belief that ART is only a part of a broad band of responses that are needed (not a silver bullet cure), and that we must take the long view of change; this is not an inoculation program, but an element of a larger wellness initiative
- To design our ART program as flexible and prescriptive to the specific needs of our youth
- To provide a broad (full staff) base of trained pro-social models as coaches, with a core team of trainers of trainers to carry on the leadership of ART from year to year
- To partner with vested stakeholders in the community and skilled professionals in related agencies as trainers, coaches, and support teams
- To create a team of visionaries who can carry the flag of encouragement and future needs/designs as ART is implemented over time
- To provide continuous and varied opportunities to generalize new skills (both to maintain over time and in new and complex situations) for all students
- To negotiate and renegotiate the curriculum with the participants to increase motivation, commitment, and especially as a way to increase our response to the real life challenges of youth
- To encourage re-entry into an ART course as a refresher

when needed

- To find positive and creative strategies to include students, parents, and families in the learning stages and maintenance stages of ART
- To acknowledge the success and gains students have made prosocially and the contributions of courage they have made to the school community
- To continue to fine tune and improve our sessions through rigorous evaluation, including pre-/post-test data keeping, student, parent, and related agency evaluations
- To make a long-term commitment to offering an ART program to students to ensure maturity as an initiative by creatively meeting the internal and external needs of school administration

A tailored and well-designed implementation process will ensure a sequential and successful offering of Aggression Replacement Training. Whole group evaluation and discussion should follow each cycle of sessions to identify what worked and what strategies or sections need amending and enhancing.

Whether instituted as an element in an aggression prevention initiative/movement and/or as a key component intervention to an aggressive school climate, Aggression Replacement Training is a curriculum that responds to the natural and developmental needs of antisocial youth. The strongest and most lasting prosocial outcomes will be the result of full staff collaboration and support, making a resolved effort to turn the tide for our troubled students.

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