

Anger in children: causes, effects and coping strategies



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Abstract

This project discusses the causes, effects and coping strategies surrounding anger in children. Anger is a natural emotion but children often lack the social and verbal capacity to describe their emotions or to develop appropriate coping mechanisms. This project takes the form of a critical literature review. Anger is caused by many factors but today's children face a particular risk of experiencing anger as a result of divorce. Without aid, persistent anger can lead to overload, characterized by extended periods of upset. The effects of anger problems include physical and health problems, including a compromised immune system and depression. Anger may also cause children to act out, leading to aggression, social problems and even violence. Coping strategies frequently focus upon adults who must provide the support services necessary for children struggling with their anger. This paper offers recommendations for practice as well as some direction for future research.

Introduction

Childhood anger is a serious behavioral issue. Dr. Bernard Golden (2003) describes the significance of this issue: Whether observing the annoyance of a two-year old demanding to have his way or responding to the hostile, rejecting rage of a distraught adolescent seeking independence, dealing with a child's anger is one of the most frustrating and challenging tasks a parent faces. Anger problems can impact a child's socialization. Anger is frequently viewed as a serious psychiatric symptom in children and is one of the most common causes for a child's psychiatric incarceration (Potegal et al., 2009). The failure to develop healthy coping strategies to deal with childhood anger

can result in significant social and behavioral problems in adulthood. The focus of this study is to analyze the causes and consequences of childhood anger and to identify healthful coping strategies. This topic is purposefully broad, allowing for the consideration of how the causes of childhood anger influence the most effective development of coping strategies. The purpose of this study is to further understanding on the phenomenon of childhood anger and to provide helpful advice for parents, teachers and psychiatric professionals working with angry children. Another goal is to develop specific recommendations for future study. This topic is explored using a detailed literature review that focuses upon empirical data.

Definitions

Children:

Those under the age of 12. Children are a distinct category of maturity that precedes adolescence and follows infancy.

Background

Review of the Literature Anger is a natural emotion with which all children must eventually learn to cope. As the NYU Child Study (2004) center notes in a press release to parents, feeling anger is a healthy component of a child's development. Anger poses some distinct challenges for children. Children often struggle with understanding their anger (Marion, 2009). Anger may also become out of hand. While the DSM-IV does not distinguish anger as a separate disorder category, anger is frequently treated as a distinct condition by many psychologists and other practitioners. " A distinct psychological problem in children which is separate from diagnoses such as

attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder”

Anger may be a brief condition lasting only a few moments or anger may be more prolonged. Anger overload involves an extended period of intense anger. Gottlieb (2008) explains that “ with anger overload, the child becomes totally consumed by his angry thoughts and feelings... the anger can last as long as an hour, with the child tuning out the thoughts, sounds or soothing words of others” concurrent with other conditions, such as bipolar disorder or social anxiety disorder.

Negative Consequences

Anger in children has been associated with a variety of different negative consequences. These include physical illness triggered by an overstretched immune system, depression and aggression. In a review of empirical literature, Kerr and Schneider (2008) conclude that “ youth who cope inappropriately with their anger are at a risk for problematic interpersonal relationships and negative outcomes in terms of both mental and general health” (p. 559). If anger management or coping strategies are not developed by the child, these problems may continue within adulthood.

School-based programs typically focus upon containing the most aggressive consequences of childhood violence. Mytton et al. (2006) surveyed school based violence prevention programs and found that anger management is an important subcomponent of these programs. However, such programs fail to offer support services to children who do not display violent tendencies. Focusing upon violent prevention is important but not adequate for dealing with anger in children.

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Discussion Methods

This project focused upon developing a literature review devoted to the topic of anger in children. Specifically, three distinct factors were studied: the cause of anger, the consequences of anger and coping mechanisms that are useful for children. The literature was collected using a variety of different resources, including the internet and electronic databases such as Questia.com and PubMed, the service of the U. S. National Library of Medicine and National Institute of Health. In addition, recent books were surveyed, as were local and regional newspapers. This search method focused upon collecting a variety of high quality resources offering empirical information and analytical discussions. Results

Divorce is a significant cause of anger in children.

Divorce negatively impacts children in many ways because the family unit suffers from a series of different changes that will generate negative emotions (Wallerstein and Blakesleet, 2006, p. 6). Children will often find themselves moved from their home, attending a different school and suffering from the loss of regular contact at home with both parents.

Children will be angered by the loss of friends and the loss of the parent without custody. Parents may choose to use their children as a tool to hurt the other and it is difficult for parents “ to keep our children’s best interests first in the middle of all of the emotional complications of divorce” (Emery 2006, p. 3). Such behavior can generate anger, frustration and resentment in children of all ages.

Analysis

Anger is a persistent problem in children. Considerable research has been conducted on the subject. Coping strategies tend to focus upon behavior

modification in children and educating parents and other adults to identify and respond to anger problems. Public attention is primarily focused upon violence in children as a consequent of anger. This focus is not surprising given the phenomenon of violence in American schools. As a USA Today article explained, “ over the last two decades, the study of violence and aggression has received an increasing amount of attention from behavioral scientists, partly in response to the rising number of incidents among children and youth” (Cillessen 48). While the study of the causes of violence is important, anger as a phenomenon in children should be studied as a distinct subject. Children with anger problems may manifest their anger in different ways. Those who turn inward and develop physical or social problems outside of the boundaries of violence may be overlooked if the focus upon violence continues. This current research focus provides some grounds for the development of new modes of empirical inquiry, which are discussed in the concluding section.

Conclusion

Anger in children is generated by a variety of different factors, including divorce. Anger is a natural emotion and its existence is not, by itself, a problem. However, children often lack the maturity to understand their anger. Failure to develop sufficient coping mechanisms can cause lifelong physical and mental problems. Anger management in children begins with responsible behavior by parents and other adults. Adults must learn to identify the warning signs that a bout of anger is going to occur (Gottlieb, 2008). Such warning signs may be specific to the child. Furthermore, parents should concentrate on learning what the anger is intended to express.

Children use anger when they cannot otherwise express their viewpoint and understanding the motivations behind the displayed anger can point to a resolution.

Recommendations

Anger has a variety of different causes, in both children and adults. However, much of the literature focuses upon anger as a result of the trauma of divorce. Parents in particular may be the cause of much of their children's anger and should be careful to act in a responsible manner. Additional causes of anger may be poor socialization skills and physical problems. The solution to child anger must begin with the preparation of adults. Children are not capable of expressing their needs and this is the primary cause of anger. The lack of autonomy and articulation of children places the responsibility upon their attending adults. Parents, teachers and other adults working with children should become educated on the manifestation of anger in children. Degree programs for youth educators should include child psychology courses to help prepare teachers and other professionals with the tools they need to identify and respond positively to a child's anger. The literature does not offer a consensus view on how to specifically help children cope. Many different options are available and it appears likely that different children may respond to different coping strategies. Future research should concentrate upon different coping strategies and mechanisms in order to determine the most successful outcomes. Such research may be used to craft a list of best practices that may then be used by child psychiatrists, parents and other interested adults. Further research should also concentrate upon the use of exercise to reduce anger in children.

Exercise is frequently used by adults to cope with anger. However, little research has specifically focused upon exercise in children as a coping strategy. Childhood obesity is increasing and linked to both anger and depression (Story et al, 2006). As Blasi explains, “obesity, considered the number one health risk for children in the United States today, is now reaching epidemic proportions” (p. 321). Given the rise of child obesity, exercise should generally be recommended to all children and its potentially ameliorative influence upon childhood anger poses another reason for the recommendation.