

The Transfer Coach

Programs to change the behavior of aggressive adolescents often succeed only at a certain time and in a certain place. That is, the program works, but only at or shortly after the time the program is conducted; and only in the same place the program is held. Thus, a program may make a youth behave better during and immediately after the weeks the program is going on and in the school, agency, or institution where the program takes place. But a few weeks later, in the schoolyard, on the school bus, or when out on a field trip, home visit, or elsewhere, the youth may be as aggressive as ever. This temporary success followed by a relapse to old, negative ways of behaving is what is called a *failure of transfer*. Transfer failures are much more the rule than the exception with aggressive or delinquent youths.

During Aggression Replacement Training (ART), in addition to instruction in social skills, anger control, and moral reasoning, adolescents receive a great deal of support, enthusiasm, encouragement, and reward for their efforts. After ART, many of them may receive very little support, reward, or other positive responses. So the common failure of transfer does not surprise us.

However, this outcome can be prevented or at least made less likely. Newly learned and thus fragile constructive skills and ways of thinking need not fade away after ART. If attempts by adolescents to use such skills in the real world are met with success — support, enthusiasm, encouragement, reward — the skill use continues, aggression is decreased, and other positive benefits result. Research shows that people like you — teachers, facility staff, community workers, parents, friends, peers, employers — are in an ideal position to provide this valuable skill-promoting support and reward. You can be a powerful transfer coach, helping to make sure that the curriculum of skills and ways of thinking practiced in ART turn into long-term or even permanent learning.

What is the ART curriculum, and how exactly can you help?

THE ART CURRICULUM

Adolescents in ART go to three types of classes. One class is Moral Reasoning Training, designed to higher levels of ethical understanding. A second class is Anger Control Training, which teaches techniques for reducing and managing feelings of anger in provocative situations. The third class is Social Skills Training, in which a series of constructive skills is taught, each one of which is a positive alternative to a destructive or aggressive response an adolescent would usually make in a certain situation.

ANGER CONTROL TRAINING

Transfer coaches respond with praise and encouragement when a youth, finding himself or herself in a provoking situation (one in which he or she usually responds with anger), responds instead by using one or more of the anger-reducing techniques learned in Anger Control Training. These techniques include ignoring the provocation or turning away, counting backwards, pausing and taking deep breaths, or imagining a calm, peaceful place. If the transfer coach rewards such behavior, the likelihood of its continuation increases.

SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING

An equal or greater impact is made by the transfer coach when it comes to the use of the Social Skills Training skills, listed next. When each skill is taught, it is broken down into a few behaviors or steps that actually make up the skill. The behavioral steps are the skill. The transfer coach looks for, encourages, and rewards these behaviors when they occur.

SPECIFIC COACHING TECHNIQUES

Specific statements, procedures, and techniques that you may find valuable in your attempts to be an effective transfer coach are as follows.

Prompting

Under the pressure of real-life situations both in and out of schools, agencies, or institutions, adolescents may forget all or part of the Social Skills Training skills (or anger-reducing techniques) they were taught, and learned, earlier. If their anxiety isn't too great or their forgetting too complete, all that may be needed for them to perform the skill correctly is some prompting. Prompting is reminding the person what to do (the skill), how to do it (the steps), when to do it (now, or the next time the situation occurs), where to do it (and where not to), and/or why the skill should be used here and now (describing the positive outcomes expected).