Violence in School: What Can We Do?

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A common disruption to learning and stability in schools occurs when pupils fight or become aggressive. This paper considers the issues of anger management, violence control and fighting reduction through a counselling programme with a high-risk pupil in secondary school. It begins by examining some of the thinking on young people and violence and aggression. Then, the author considers the place of counselling in schools in relation to this issue. Interventions for the practitioner to consider are discussed, including how to make a clear diagnosis of the nature of violence for the particular youngster, an analysis of anger-triggers and an ambitious attempt to modify a belief-system that holds that 'might is right'. The author argues that occasional incidents of violent disruption are a reality in education, and while media reporting exaggerates the problem, schools need more imaginative strategies with the few targeted individuals than exclusion from school.

Keywords: aggression; violent incidents; anger management; secondary schools; interventions.

Introduction

Fighting among pupils, particularly (but not exclusively) boys, is a common feature of school life. The prevalence of pupils fighting in school and of some 'hard' characters being persistently aggressive towards their peers has been a rising concern in the United States and in Britain. At transition to secondary school, new power games occur where many tough characters strive to become 'the knock of the school'. Social standing among peers for some disaffected pupils is more important than academic achievement or the approval of teachers and parents. An imaginative curriculum that includes 'emotional literacy' will explore means of conflict resolution that avoid aggression, but it falls to senior staff and pastoral personnel to shape the school ethos and manage the aftermath of violence.

Being tough and 'solid' has great appeal among the year group in the first three years of secondary school, but, as pupils move into the final years, to be feared or respected as a person 'one does not mess around with' has less appeal for friendship bonding and popularity. Pastoral managers and school counsellors may capitalize on this altering relational dynamic, in assisting aggressive pupils to make the connections between aggressive stances and desired outcomes.

Anger management has become a frequent request for volatile youngsters whose reactions are unmeasured. Diagnosing the causes of fighting and violence requires keen observation and engaged listening, and implementing a remedy without an understanding of peer group pressure is likely to fail. Equally futile is to exclude pupils without a clear rationale underlying the decision, both for the good of the witnessing peers and of the individual. This paper considers the management of aggression among some young people in school and offers an approach to help a high-risk pupil avoid fighting.

Research on Youth Violence

Anger is a 'culturally situated performance' (Gergen, 2001, p. 89) in the sense that, like all emotions, it serves a social function, and school offers an arena for anger to spin off into violence. There is considerable evidence that adolescents exposed to violence are at increased risk of a range of psychosocial problems, including reduced academic performance (Saigh, Mrouch and Bremner, 1997; James, 2003; Goleman, 2006), substance abuse (Kilpatrick, Aciermo, Saunders, Resnick and Best, 2000), developmental disturbance (Pynoos, Steinberg and Piacentini, 1995; James, 2003) and impaired moral development (Bandura, 1986; Thornberry, 1998). High-profile shootings in the US have left educationalists in search of explanations (Kellerman, 1999). Stabbings of peers (and teachers) have occurred in the United Kingdom, indicating that the problem is in no way confined to the United States. Violence by pupils against teachers in Scottish LEA schools during 2000–2001 had doubled to 4,501 from the previous year, and although the report suggested that the rise may be due to improved reporting procedures and increased awareness these figures are still a concern (Sorensen, 2002). High-profile cases in England include an incident of rape by a pupil on a teacher.

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Kellerman's (1999) study of psychopathic killers is a sobering read indeed. Society has no option but to take the problem seriously, to ban guns from children outright, to work with violent children before they are six and to remove high-risk youngsters (boys in the main) from home into families where love and good adult modelling teaches them how to manage their aggression. For adolescent 'psychopathic killers', says Kellerman, who prove unresponsive to psychotherapy or rehabilitation there is no choice but to lock them up for life (1999, pp. 109–13). Fortunately, the vast majority of youngsters in school do not exhibit this level of aggression and violence.

Although boys are primarily viewed as fighters, my limited researches into name-calling (Lines, 1996, 1999) and other studies (Luxmoore, 2000) have shown that girls can be excessively violent and boys can be subtle and covert in bullying behaviour (Ness, 2004). With testosterone reaching its highest levels during adolescence, boys will naturally become challenging at this time (Lines, 2006a), but hormonal factors are not nearly as critical as early nurturing (James, 2003) and familial conditions that aid development of the 'emotional brain' (Goleman, 2006).

The aetiology of the violent behaviour of young people is complex, but the research appears to fall on the effect of witnessing aggression in the home or on the street (Lines, 2006a). Research into impulsive aggression falls on both sides of the nature/nurture divide, and it is likely that reasons are a combination of both factors (Kellerman, 1999, pp. 52–7), with the latter being the most decisive (James, 2003). Many young people regularly feast on images of aggression and violence displayed in films and video computer games, and research (Kellerman, 1999; Rigby, 2002) has examined the possibility that viewing violence influences aggressive behaviour *per se*. This was one hypothesis drawn in 1993 with the murder of young James Bulger by two 10-year-olds in Liverpool. Horrific though the killing was, and much as it shocked the nation, there was no evidence that the boy-killers had watched a violent video, and there is no substantial evidence that viewing violence on television creates violent children (Black and Newman, 1995), or that poverty is a causal factor (Aber, 1994). Neither is there evidence that race alone determines aggressive pathology, in spite of the proportionately higher numbers of black boys being interned for aggressive assaults in some communities (Kellerman, 1999).

While scapegoats will be found in television, social deprivation and black urban hardship, research has identified the predominant factors as witnessing and being subjected to domestic maltreatment (Campbell and Schwarz, 1996) and corporal punishment (Straus, 1996) where an ethic of *might is right* is learned and mastered. A significant number of pupils are deprived of the benefit of being brought up in homes and communities of peace and tranquillity (James, 2003), but have to survive within families where strife and domestic violence are commonplace (Rigby, 2002; Winstok, Eisikovits and Karnieli-miller, 2004; Lines, 2007).

Behavioural psychologists divert attention from the aetiology of behavioural outbursts and promote a pragmatic solution by looking at how such behaviour may be managed through classroom strategies (Rogers, 2000, 2002), but such approaches serve to contain rather than modify individual aggressive behaviour. School-based, preventative programmes designed to help pupils to decrease their aggression through problem-solving and relationship-enhancing skills have proven effective. Smokowski, Fraser, Day, Galinsky and Bacallao (2004) contrasted 51 third-grade pupils with 50 of a control group to show that those who engaged in programmes of making choices had significantly higher scores on social contact and concentration and less overt aggression.

Fighting in School

One predictable fact is that delinquent and violent primary school pupils are soon noticed in secondary school, and, with the exception of very few cases, schools have limited means of dealing with them other than by fixed-term exclusion. Teachers have registered a health and safety issue within their various associations when trying to stop a fight. Formerly, when a fight occurred, the crowd would break up when the teacher arrived. This does not happen as much today. Teachers have commented that the biggest problem is breaking through the ring to reach the culprits, with a risk of being charged with physical assault.

Frontline players are often instrumental in stage-managing fights in school, but rarely are such characters noticed among the mayhem. Gossiping, text-messaging insults, mobile video-recording, accusations and counter-accusations, abuse over computer chat lines and other winding-up ploys are skilfully deployed by secondary parties to maximum effect and can spin off into the community with serious consequences.

The ethos and code of conduct for most secondary schools promotes non-violence, social harmony and order, and a significant number of pupils fail to meet such standards. Senior teachers have little recourse but to exclude offenders temporarily to address aggressive behaviour. In a post-exclusion meeting after a fight at my school, parents will be confronted in the hope that they can bring about change in their son or daughter. All too often, however, such pupils fail to modify their behaviour and this leads staff to then consider that the parent is incapable of modifying the behaviour of their offspring or that they simply do not care.

A breakdown between school and home occurs particularly when it is learned that the youngster has much free time to be out at night, with few boundaries,

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and no questions asked as to where they are or what they may be doing. A permanent exclusion is inevitable for those pupils who fail to stop fighting. In such cases, the problem is not solved but passed on to the streets, to resurface in a cultural milieu where there is no means of control or possibility of reparation. A blame culture may circulate in displacing the responsibility to parents, the media, politicians, school pastoral staff or social conditions (Rigby, 2002).

What Can We Do?

Counselling Role

Not all high-risk youngsters become violent adults, owing to a range of factors like mixing with different friends or the efforts of significant teachers and youth leaders who have *willed them* to achieve in education towards future employment. Such new influences will have *role-modelled* and *demonstrated* calm and measured means of handling tension. Pastoral managers and counsellors have a particular role in supporting such youngsters in this way.

During the early period of transition to secondary school, some young boys are involved in fighting. Within today's competitive and hierarchical school culture, some groups of boys are driven to establish their identity through pecking orders of superiority. It appears important to show publicly who's 'hard' and who's a 'pussy'. I will often hear comments like 'Luke's the knock of the school'. When observing the playground behaviour of boys and girls, it soon becomes apparent that positions of status and power hierarchies are regularly played out in small tussles and altercations. Not all these power games end up in physical fighting, however, but when they do, the consequences can be serious.

At transition, incoming pupils, particularly girls, form allegiances with a 'best friend' as an unconscious manoeuvre to secure an ally in the new (perceived) hostile environment – a horrific mythology of bullying circulates. Bonds are forged with sleepovers and parental reinforcement, and the lever that is used is the expectation to preserve one's personal secrets. When the new school proves not to be so hostile, such friendships become too possessive and limiting. Pupils branch out and establish new attachments, and loyalties become tested, secrets are publicised and many feel isolated (Luxmoore, 2000). Much 'trivial' name-calling and bullying in the first two years is for fun or over friendship betrayal, and the need for mediation engages pastoral managers, mentors, the school counsellor and peer counsellors (Lines, 2005).

I have noticed over the years that young people in the first two years of secondary school have admired peers who are tough, and in year 7 many intimidated youngsters select such characters as 'pseudo-friends' for protection. When counselling young people who have been termed 'school bullies' in the early years of secondary school, I have found it effective to share with them narratives formed from observations that in the latter years students are much more discriminating over choices of friends, in the sense that they will not build friendships through motives of fear and protection but through genuine comradeship and for what each party can give and take from that relationship. A typical intervention might be:

> How does it feel that some of your year group may choose you as a friend merely because they are afraid of you rather than because of what you are as a person?

Assessing Why Pupils Fight

The practitioner has a role in first assessing why some characters choose and continue to fight, and then to assist them to seek alternative means of addressing their conflicts. The initial task, therefore, is an assessment of why a particular boy or girl chooses to fight.

Some fights occur spontaneously from accidental bumping, misinterpretations or as a result of rumour or misunderstanding, and these are relatively easy to manage through conventional pastoral channels. A pupil may become uncharacteristically aggressive, due to tensions in the home, and in such cases the counselling role is clear. But there are pupils who stage fights after school with all the ritualistic behaviour that characterises the great western, as though each combatant has a lust for blood, and there are also youngsters who cultivate an aggressive persona as a preferred trait of personality. In such cases, the counselling role is not so clear. A brief integrative approach, utilising cognitive-behavioural techniques, is put forward as an ideal model, owing to its confronting style and the challenging nature of its various therapeutic interventions (Lines, 2006a). The approach is illustrated through a case vignette of a year 7 pupil whom I refer to as Stefan.

Stefan

Stefan was a year 7 pupil of African ethnicity who had recently moved into the school after being permanently excluded from his previous school after punching the headteacher. His father and four older brothers had each served time in prison for violence and physical assault upon people in the neighbourhood. Stefan had witnessed and had become engaged in much violence throughout his childhood: both parents fighting in the street, neighbours being stabbed and bottle-fights in pub grounds (the case is written up in Lines, 2006a).

Stefan was at risk of further permanent exclusion after three serious fights within the first term (one I had witnessed). He was regarded by teachers as a boy of above-average intelligence and as a pupil who thinks

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he can get away with things because of his forceful nature. Stefan was committed to explore how he might help himself, since he did not want to get excluded again and to follow the course of his older brothers. We were working collaboratively using the Egan three-stage model in brief therapy (Lines, 2006a), in which we had identified clear specific goals around an agenda that was both realistic and within his capabilities. Simply put, Stefan's chief goal was to stop fighting.

As with fighting, there are a range of causal factors to account for why an individual pupil might become very angry and out of control. There has been much debate over the value of catharsis with young people. Some feel that by articulating a problem, an invitation provides an opportunity to vent frustration in a contained setting and many pupils say it helps them become less stressed. Others counter-argue that validating anger merely repeats, and therefore reinforces, maladaptive behaviour that generally is self-defeating – why practise a behaviour one wishes to eliminate? I favour an approach that helps pupils to examine the peculiar antecedents of their anger and the particular triggers that set it off (Goldstein, 2004). I think there are three principal motivating influences that cause young persons to lose self-control:

1. A young person may, uncharacteristically, be carrying anger as a result of a loss or bereavement or a family situation that is the cause of great anxiety, and that finds no expression other than by violent outburst.
2. A young person may have poor communication skills that cause them to be intimidated and easily wound up. This leaves them vulnerable to teasing and humiliation, because they have very limited strategies to cope with frustration. Many have a low threshold of toleration and fire up quickly.
3. A young person may, unconsciously, internalise a male-dominant and aggressive persona from a significant family member, or an idealised figure from the street.

In an assessment, a counselling practitioner may adopt a range of integrative cognitive-behavioural approaches depending upon the particular cause of a loss of self-control or the character make-up of the individual youngster. With the first category, the issues of loss and bereavement will need addressing through cognitive-humanistic therapy (Nelson-Jones, 1996) in order that the individual may integrate loss within their changed situation. With the second, (s)he might adopt a social skills training programme of affective-behavioural regulation strategies (Lines, 2006a). And with the third, a pupil may need insight over where preferred personas may lead. With Stefan, I was unclear whether category two or three, or a combination of both, were serving as the stimulus to him becoming angry and ultimately drawn to fighting.

Anger Management

A significant number of youngsters become outraged at the smallest provocation. Goleman (2006) draws attention to findings of neuroscience that show how part of the brain called the amygdala stimulates the emotional centres of rage before the neocortex can plan a more measured response. James (2003) makes the point that some aggressive children are the product of capricious punishments, a pattern that makes them slightly paranoid or combative. There is a perceptual flaw with many who turn out to be bullies, in that they imagine their peers to be more hostile towards them than they actually are. 'This leads them to misperceive neutral acts as threatening ones – an innocent bump is seen as a vendetta – and to attack in return. That, of course, leads other children to shun them . . .' (Goleman, 2006, p. 235).

ANGER MANAGEMENT: RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

- ✓ Are you always able to choose your behaviour when you feel angry?
- When angry can you still be aware of how others are feeling?
- Do you express yourself clearly and quickly when something upsets you?
- ✓ Are you aware of the hurt and/or fear that is causing anger?
- ✓ Do you feel powerful without yelling?
- Are you aware of the body sensations that come with anger?
- Do you have a specific plan for when you feel anger coming on?
- Have you sorted out upsetting issues of the past so that they don't affect you today?
- ✓ Are you very clear about how your anger affects others?
- Are you able to find the positives in any situation?

(Adapted from Pegasus 2007)

Figure 1. Anger management: response assessment.

There are diagnostic tools and treatment programmes available to screen the problem of anger and match approach with need (Goldstein, 2004). I have developed my own assessment tool, as I feel that many referrals for anger management in school are inappropriate in that anger is used by an aggressive pupil to manipulate adults, or to instill fear into a rival peer, rather than it being an uncontrollable impulse that a subject wishes to harness. My Anger Management Assessment tools were used with Stefan and are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Being aware of personal hurt and how Stefan's anger was affecting others was interesting, but I was not sure of his abilities to choose his behaviour. The two incidents described have similarities and differences that may be accounted for by the perceived power Stefan had in either situation. The customary responses to threat of self through *fight or flight* were evident and, although I could not be certain how self-aware Stefan was over his abilities of self-control, I was interested in his disclosures of feeling bad, guilty and sad after the event, so much so that I felt this might be the lever by which I could enlist Stefan's will to change.

Pupil Alignment

Not always being self-reflective, I used the angry images chart (Figure 3) to help Stefan identify how he

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felt by likening his feeling to one of the figures, and he selected the bull. I further asked him which of the prompts caused him to become like an angry bull, and he underlined 'putting me down', 'being shouted at', 'telling me off' and 'putting my family or friends down'. I showed Stefan a diagram of the brain to illustrate how the amygdala functions to help him understand why 'rage' is the first feeling to occur in the face of a perceived threat, and told him how we have to try to dampen this normal response that appears more heightened for him than for many of his peers (Goleman, 2006).

ANGER MANAGEMENT: INCIDENTS ASSESSMENT

Describe two incidents which leave you feeling angry

A *When Jason was in the dining room he told Kerry and Suzanne I was a pussy. He's been dissing [name-calling] my mum for ages, and telling kids he can beat me up*

B *Mr Osborne had a go at me and told me to move. I said why? He said, 'I don't like your attitude, get out!' I said, 'I don't like yours,' and walked off.*

On a Scale 1–10 score how angry you were left feeling:

A = *10*

B = *8*

What were you thinking when angry?

A *I've got to kill him*

B *He's a twat!*

What did you do when you were angry?

A *I smashed his face in, and he's dead after school*

B *I stayed under the stairwell till the bell went for next lesson*

What do you have to do to calm down?

A *Fight*

B *Get away*

Do you follow anyone in the family in regard to anger?

Mum says I'm like my brother, and my dad, I suppose – especially when he's had a drink or is drunk

Underline which applies:

When angry I swear and don't care what I say

I strike out at someone

I smash things up

I feel bad afterwards/guilty/sad/hateful of others/hateful of myself

I know I lose self-control

Figure 2. Anger management: incidents assessment.

A feeling of being 'put down' speaks of Stefan's self-image, which was examined later, but in order to help him control personal anger when being corrected and, particularly, 'shouted at', I had to encourage him to replace the mental image under his threatened state. This 'self-coaching' technique (Nelson-Jones, 1996) I call 'image replacement' (Lines, 2001). None of us like being shouted at, but for some youngsters a shout is the prelude to being struck and, although this is extremely unlikely (one would hope) in school, we have to remember that youngsters sometimes react on an impulsive level of consciousness.

> Stefan, when a teacher shouts at you, I would like you to try not to personalise what is going on, as though your teacher doesn't like you, but see him or her as doing a difficult job of managing your group. Sometimes teachers are acting being angry, but on other occasions they may get angry. They know they shouldn't hit you. I would like you to keep looking at your teacher when they shout at you, but think in your mind and talk to yourself. Try saying: 'I know I'm OK and lots of people like me, especially X (practitioner). I'll just sit this out and try not to become angry and say anything that'll make matters worse'. Take deep breaths and remain calm, saying nothing but doing exactly as told.

This was practised in session, and Stefan soon mastered it in lessons.

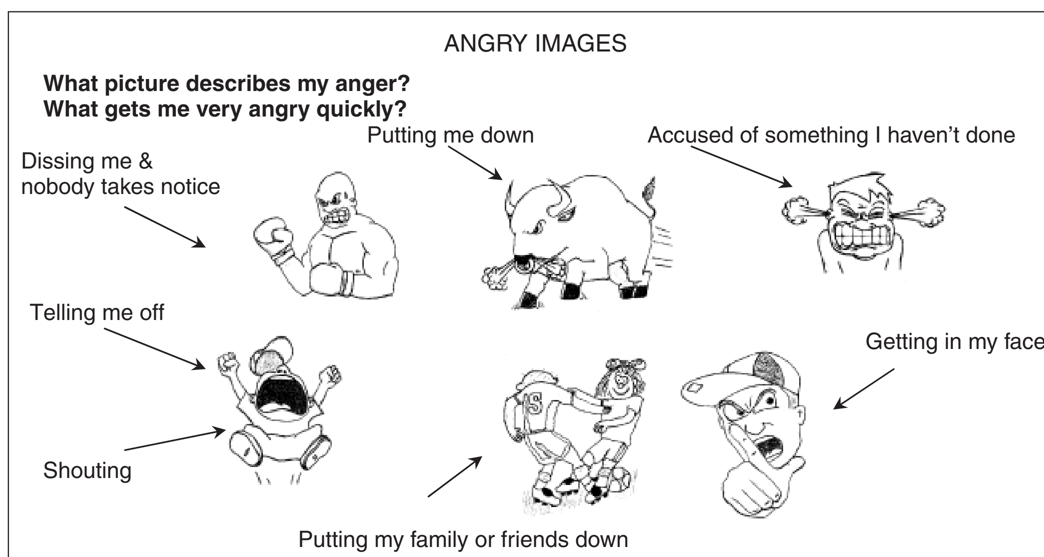

Figure 3. Angry images chart (this figure first appeared in *Brief Counselling in Schools: Working with Young People from 11–18* (2006) by Dennis Lines, produced here by kind permission of Sage Publications).

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Anger Triggers and Cognitive Restructuring

When working with pupils like Stefan over impulsive anger, they are asked to log events that cause them to become very angry. They are then asked in counselling to try to identify the triggers that prompt their loss of temper. I ask them to take an A4 sheet of paper and draw a line from top to bottom. On the left they list the triggers, and on the right we attempt to identify what hidden beliefs and assumptions may account for their impulsive anger stemming from those identified triggers, following a cognitive-behavioural methodology. Three of Stefan's unconscious assumptions were recorded (Table 1).

These irrational beliefs, or unconscious assumptions, were disputed in therapy, and more realistic ones were superimposed on Stefan's first constructs.

- The first assumption was rephrased as: *Pupils might cuss me because they are playing a game of winding me up to over-react, just as I do with other kids. It does not mean they think I am stupid.*
- The second was reframed as: *The teacher thinks I could improve and so takes the trouble to correct me. If he thought I was no good he would let me do as I like.*
- The third assumption was altered to: *The kid may be scared of me and may stare because he is nervous that I might beat him up. There's no obvious connection between staring and wanting a fight.*

Table 1. Stefan's underlying assumptions that trigger his anger

Antecedent trigger	Underlying assumption
Kids in class cuss me	*Other pupils put me down, making out I'm stupid.*
I get told off	*Teacher thinks I am no good.*
A kid stares at me	*Pupil thinks he is harder than me and wants a fight.*

With the second assumption, I could not rule out the possibility that Stefan might experience a low self-esteem and a sense of low value from significantly powerful adults, and therapy could have explored this avenue under a person-centred model. But the more urgent need was to arrest the frequency of fighting, and so therapy had to address this concern first (see Figure 4).

Stefan began to understand that when events moved to Step 3, even to Steps 2 and 1, it was then too late – when peers sensed a fight was about to take place, expectations were high and the jostling crowd would give him no outlet to back down and withdraw, and a fight (and all that that might cost) would occur. We needed to arrest the process before Step 1. I felt that Stefan was powerless to work on consequential contingent factors, other than a projected perspective of future adult personality, which in his developmental phase would have little impact.

Modelling Calm, Self-Controlled Behaviour

Underlying Stefan's violent outbursts were the powerful role-modelling influences and unconscious

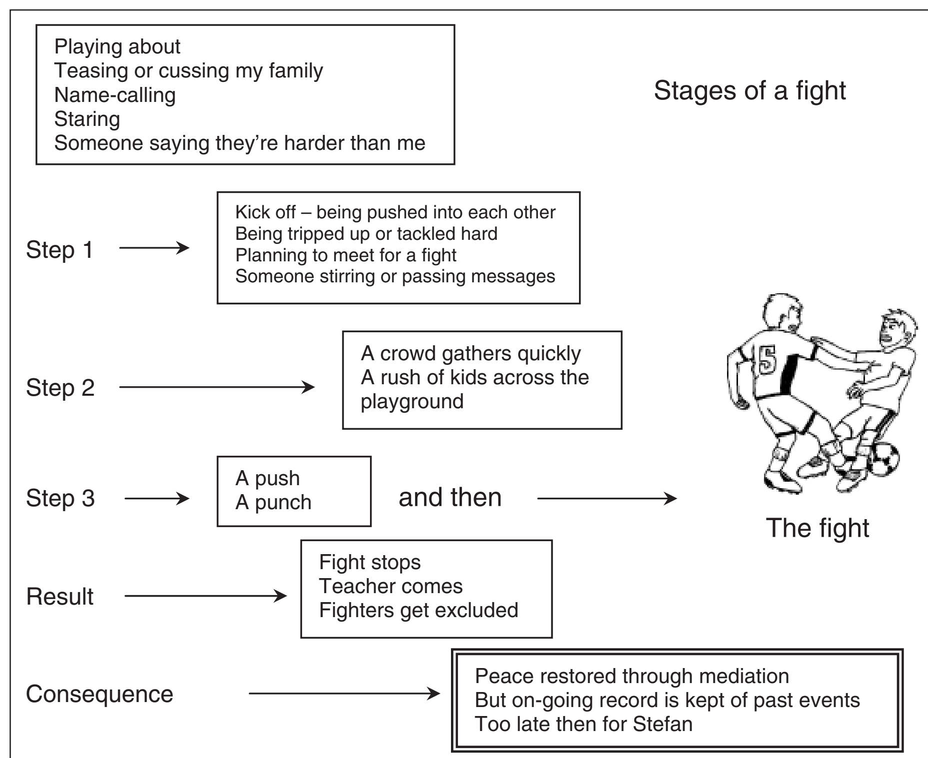

Figure 4. Antecedent stages leading to a fight (this figure first appeared in *Brief Counselling in Schools: Working with Young People From 11–18* (2006) by Dennis Lines, produced here by kind permission of Sage Publications).

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expectations of him within his social environment, and altering reinforced beliefs and attitudes is a larger and more difficult task (Lines, 2006b). There were occasions where Stefan observed my calm response to stress: I was asked to drive him home on one occasion after he had lost his temper, and an impatient driver drove close to my boot, blasting his horn, at which I pulled over calmly and allowed him to pass. Similar self-controlled calmness by Stefan's friends served as effective role-modelling behaviour: one pupil made light of serious intimidating and became wholly unperturbed, using humour to desensitise tension, and, as Stefan had a sense of humour, we drew on this as a technique he could utilise to good effect.

Further sessions involved working on how he felt when corrected by teachers, and what he was saying *to himself* when threatened. We planned escape routes of humour, 'self-coaching' skills and 'self-talk' to help him remain calm (Nelson-Jones, 1996). At the slightest hint of a fight brewing, he was instructed to remove himself from the situation and come and sit outside the counselling room to practise the rehearsed skills when I was free. He was given an Anger-management Pass for teachers to excuse him. It was essential for Stefan to keep checking at base after every failure and success in order to fine-tune his responses to new situations. The tight monitoring programme was helping Stefan to manage those occasions where impulsive anger might trigger a fight, and the closing work was to present Stefan with a new narrative of being by which he might 'learn to become a non-aggressive person' (Lines, 2006a).

Conclusion

Fighting and impulsive aggression is not uncommon in school, and assessing why a pupil may fight regularly is imperative. Anger management has become a common requirement of behavioural referrals in school, but an accurate assessment of why a particular youngster becomes angry – whether a recent event like bereavement, unresolved issues of the past or a preferred 'tough guy' persona – must direct the course of interventions. Helping pupils to manage their anger involves identifying the triggers and exercising control over identified antecedents of violent outbursts, antecedents that counselling has brought to the youngster's awareness. Once the pupil has experienced the benefits of newly mastered, non-violent behaviour, these social paybacks will reduce the need for further adult management.

Youngsters brought up in homes where violence is prevalent will have limited non-aggressive ways to solve their disputes, and pastoral managers and counselling practitioners can assist such pupils by aligning themselves with high-risk pupils to coach them to manage conflict less violently. The importance of giving high-risk youngsters an opportunity to witness non-aggressive remedies to managing stress by adults and fellow peers cannot be understated.

Being a qualitative study, this paper is not to suggest that these outlined approaches will be effective with each high-risk violent pupil. More research is required to test out the methods of identifying anger-triggers and the effects of attempting to challenge belief systems of 'might is right' so that the school does not become exasperated and have to exclude aggressive youngsters for continual fighting.

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