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# Reducing Aggressive Male Behavior In Elementary School: Promising Practices

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## ABSTRACT

*Student aggression and violent behavior, especially among males, is pervasive and problematic in the classroom. When incorporated in the lesson design, promising practices (music, movement, and visual stimulation) are evidence-based strategies that may reduce male aggression in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** Aggression; Male Aggression; Elementary School Males; Promising Practices

## INTRODUCTION

School administrators across the nation are seeking ways to maintain orderly school environments. One of the biggest challenges for educators is learning appropriate ways to prevent and respond to student aggression and violence. Larson (2008) affirmed that students who engage in physical aggression in school endanger the school culture and present serious challenges to the administrative staff. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) posits that developing positive school climates and improving school discipline policies are critical steps to raising academic and supporting student success (p. 1). Hence, a growing body of research and best practices that support efforts to improve school climate, student behavior, and discipline policies and practices now exists (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 1).

Elementary school principals and teachers spend a considerable amount of time managing student outbursts, bullying, and other forms of physical and verbal aggression (Smallwood, 2003). Adelman and Taylor (2002) assert 12-22 percent of all students in school suffer from mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders, and few receive mental health services. Additionally, 18 percent of students have special needs and require extraordinary interventions and treatments beyond traditional resources available in the classroom (Dunn & Baker, 2002).

Student aggressive behavior on all levels is problematic, and male student aggression is particularly challenging. A 2009 national study of Catholic elementary and secondary schools examining patterns of mental health service provision, staffing, needs, and barriers found male aggressive/disruptive behavior a primary concern by two-thirds of participating schools (Frabutt, Clark, & Speech, 2010). Aggressive behavior undermines the integrity of the learning environment, interferes with students' academic and social outcomes, contributes to staff and student stress, and threatens school safety (Larson, 2008; Smallwood, 2003; Trussell, 2008). Smith, Lochman, and Daunic, (2005) warn that it is important to recognize that when students act out, it is a call for help. Moreover, teachers must adhere to these calls for help and provide optimal opportunities for meaningful changes in behavior.

## MALE STUDENT AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Research reveals that male student behavior at the elementary school level includes fighting and rambunctious actions and seeking opportunity for exploration and fun (Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013). Reducing aggression in elementary school males can help schools to capitalize on male students' energy and imagination to be successful, and not feel that school is full of useless tasks and harsh authority (Johnson, & Gooliaff, 2013). There are a variety of manifestations of male aggression, and research suggests that high levels of physical aggression in early stages is dangerous and can ultimately result in criminal and violent behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Schaeffer, Ialongo, Hubbard, Petras, Masyn, Poduska, et al., 2006).

Boys are often classified as exhibiting higher levels of physical aggression when compared to girls (Bailey & Ostrov, 2007). In the classroom setting, boys are rated by teachers as more likely than girls to engage in physically aggressive behavior (Giles & Heyman, 2005). Research proposes that males are drawn to physical aggressive behaviors largely by observing aggressive behavior in others (Ozkol, Zucker, Spinazzola, 2011). Male students have unusually high numbers of suspensions and expulsions, special education placements, and diagnoses of attention deficit disorder (Brekelmans, Mainhard, den Brok, & Wubbels, 2011).

Despite studies concerned with controlling behavior problems and acts of aggression, problems at the elementary school level continue to occur and lead to more severe expressions of aggression (Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013; Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000). This problem has negatively impacted male students because they are likely to be disciplined more frequently than female students (NCES, 2011). In 2011, Local Virginia schools reported a vast amount of offenses falling under the categories of disruptive demonstrations and classroom disorderly conduct (VDOE, 2013). To address the growing concerns of aggression and violent behavior, the Governor of Virginia appointed a statewide task force to study K-12 school safety issues and make recommendations to address aggressive and violent behaviors (VDOE, 2013). Meanwhile, a promising solution to the problem of elementary school male aggression could reside in the approaches teachers take to male engagement in substantive activities (Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013).

### **PROMISING PRACTICES**

Educators play a critical role in ensuring that manifestations of aggression do not cause distractions in the classroom (Boxer, Musher-Eizenman, Dubow, Danner, & Heretick, 2006). Educators should understand that promising practices are to be incorporated with other key learning areas, and teachers need to acquire the skill set to do so (Vitulli, Pitts Santoli, & Fresne, 2013). Research advises that teacher participation in controlling aggression can be imparted through the use of different approaches, which specify clearly defined principles and objectives (Boxer et al., 2006). Three distinct approaches may help to reduce male aggression at the elementary school level: music, movement, and visual stimulation.

Researchers suggest that music is an effective tool for altering emotional and behavioral states of mind, actions, and spiritual states (Penman & Becker, 2009). Further studies promote that if movement and rhythm are interwoven with the curriculum, positive effects on behavior can be achieved (Neal, McCray, Webb-John, & Bridges, S., 2003). Lastly, visual stimulation is an extremely powerful strategy that can have significant effects on behavior (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012). Tate (2007) affirms that when students' brains and bodies are actively engaged in learning, behavior problems are diminished (p. 4).

### **IMPLEMENTING PROMISING PRACTICES**

#### **Music**

Mangram and Weber (2012) assert that students in the United States listen to an overwhelming amount of music totaling more than 10,500 hours a year, during 12 years of schooling. Still, many teachers do not know how to implement music effectively among other promising practices into daily classroom instruction (Mangram & Weber, 2012). For instance, music can be used to set the classroom climate, maneuver subject transitions, and to assist in capturing the attention of young males (Tate, 2007). In addition, teachers can gather a collection of songs from different genres or assign a genre to represent a different subject area. This can help and alert elementary school males of a transition in subject matter. This can also assist in maintaining the attention of male students. Depending on the energy or style of music chosen, it can change the state of the brain, thereby promoting excitement and anticipation in elementary school males (Tate, 2007).

Music strengthens learning and has emotional impact on the brain (Tileston, 2004). Therefore, teachers should play music as a tool for building emotions and strengthening memory (Feinstein, 2004). Teachers may allow students to work individually or with peers to create a song, rhyme, rap, or poem that demonstrates their understanding of content, wherein students mentally rehearse what is taught (Tate, 2007). Ultimately, the best use

of music for classroom management is for calming students down and engaging the brain for learning (Erlauer, 2003; Sousa, 2001).

### **Movement**

Listening for long periods of time can also be challenging for boys. During school hours, boys are required to listen to educational instruction in the form of lectures, or lesson and stories, and venturing off task often results in being chastised (Kercood & Banda, 2012). Movement has a therapeutic effect on the body and brain (Tate, 2007). When students are kinesthetically involved in a lesson, this tends to calm down students' brains (Jensen, 2000; Thayer, 1996). Moreover, movement combines mind, body, and emotion, ensuring that learning is meaningful and retained (Jensen, 2003).

Studies show that instead of reprimanding students' movements, adding activity might be beneficial to include before or during academic task (Kercood & Banda, 2012). For every correct answer given by a student, have the entire class standup and clap one time and shout the word, "Yes!" This can help promote learning and make it fun, and fresh. Adding physical activity can assist boys who have problems being attentive or even diagnosed with a disorder (Kercood & Banda, 2012). Intervention studies recommend adding physical activities to daily routine academic tasks (Kercood & Banda, 2012). Physical movement activities evoke positive emotions through role-play, theater, drama, mime, art, and simulations (Jensen, 1998; Tate, 2007).

### **Visual Stimulation**

Visuals may help communicate a teacher's message in a more powerful way than words because the brain quickly captures and remembers visuals (Allen, 2008). Concept maps, flowcharts, graphic icons, cartoons, sketches, and drawings are all visuals that help students understand and process new content (Allen, 2008); therefore, thinking with visuals may be an effective tool for elaboration (Jensen, 2009).

Teachers who integrate visual graphics into the learning environment stimulate boys' natural curiosity and motivation in learning (Gazi & Aksal, 2011). Visual aided learning is part of mediated instruction and helps boys to think and understand subject matter (Gazi & Aksal, 2011). Instead of creating a basic black and white PowerPoint, add some color to the background page, and pictures to coincide with what is being taught. One can even add reward pictures for correct answers such as gigantic smiley faces, or famous people that boys are aware of. Research supports that visual aided learning enhances students' creative and critical thinking skills and can actually help to construct knowledge (Gazi & Aksal, 2011). Tate (2010) suggests facilitating a discussion with visuals by writing key words and phrases or drawings pictures on a dry erase SMART board, or document camera. For example, write noun and words "person," "place," "thing," and "idea" when explaining its definition, or draw and label a picture of the heart to explain its function. Color leaves its imprint on the brain. Write with a blue marker, which works well for most students' brains. Emphasize key words or phrases in red (p. 127).

### **CONCLUSION**

Empirical evidence suggests that aggression at the elementary school level is associated with school failure, school dropout, job failure, crime, and incarceration (van Lier, Vitaro, & Eisner, 2007). Preventative measures are necessary to help assist students in achieving success (van Lier et al., 2007). Studies show that many programs have been established to prevent further development of young male aggression in hope of attracting more attention on addressing behavior at the elementary school level (Hein, 2004; van Lier et al., 2007). However, these programs fail to consistently yield desired results. In fact, research of school-based programs created to prevent aggressive behaviors in students has documented inconsistent effects (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). It is important that teachers begin to feel empowered enough to address these behaviors in classrooms through innovative promising practices.

Teacher interactions with male students help to determine classroom behavior (Brekelmans et al., 2011). The way teachers affiliate with students and control classroom processes are important factor in explaining the effectiveness of classrooms for student learning (Brekelmans et al., 2011). Administrators and educators should

embrace these promising practices and not view them as taking away from instructional time but rather enhancing and enriching current curriculums. Educators can actually reduce aggressive behavior in elementary school males by receiving continuous reinforcement (Orpinas & Horne, 2004). By focusing on the solution rather than the problem, teachers are more likely to develop positive strategies for change (Orpinas & Horne, 2004).

There is a plethora of research pertaining to ways of reducing male aggression. However, all educators and administrators can assist with this effort by working to discover alternate ways to better engage male students in efforts to reduce aggression levels at elementary school. Promising practices such as incorporating music, movement, and visual stimulation can assist teachers in minimizing male aggression at the elementary school level. Many more strategies are necessary to achieve and maintain desired male behavior in classrooms. It is critical to address the etiology of elementary male aggressive behavior early to prevent this behavior from further disrupting classrooms and causing harm to teachers and students.

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