A is for Anger: How and Why Should We Teach it?

By: *Dru Tomlin*

With Valentine's Day right around the corner, I thought it would be appropriate to write about **anger**. Sounds about right. Before I was a middle school teacher and administrator, I was a young adolescent. And as I've mentioned on previous posts, my middle grades diet was a balance of happiness and sadness—with a nice dollop of **anger** thrown in for good measure.

Thanks to some kids (and a teacher or two) who were mean, nasty, and driven to target new kids who didn't "fit in," I was filled with rage on many days as a kid at my junior high school in Virginia Beach. I was, in fact, one of those kids who did good in school and kept quiet, while simmering underneath was a cauldron of anger ready to explode. *Hello, nice to meet you.* While my anger has created some interesting emotional echoes that I continue to hear as an adult, all of that fiery emotion has also taught me a fruitful lesson about anger and young adolescents (and adults, as well). Saddle up. It's a radical idea: while it's important to teach our students about love and understanding, **I also think we need to teach kids about what to do with anger and misunderstanding.**

Why would we do something like that? Isn't there enough anger in the world? Why do we need to talk about it in our schools, too? Here's why. We have a problem with how we deal with anger in schools. We tend to treat anger as a deviant, abnormal reaction to the world—and consequently, we tend to treat students who are angry as deviant and abnormal, as well. When we label students like that or tell them to "just calm down" and "get over it" when they're angry, many things can happen.

Here are four consequences that can happen when we just shut down an angry student and dismiss their anger:

1. An **angry student** might just get angrier and do something worse ("You all don't get me. You don't care. You just want me to shut up. Just wait until tomorrow.").
2. An **angry student** might learn that anger is wrong, and therefore, they are wrong and they don't belong—and they drop out mentally or physically ("Man, I knew it. I'll never fit in at this school. I'm never coming back.").
3. An **angry student** might not get any tools or strategies to help them deal with their anger in the future, so they get stuck in the same cycle ("So what if I cussed him out or hit him? What else should I do when he steps up to me next time? I'm going to the same thing.").
4. An **angry student** might become an angry adult who burns more bridges with fiery words and deeds and becomes more isolated and more angry ("You don't agree with me? You're just like everyone else. I'm done with you. I'm going to stick with people who think just like me.")

If those consequences are possible, don't we have the duty and obligation to try something different with anger? If we want to empower young adolescents, increase their achievement in all areas, and create stronger, more positive learning communities, shouldn't we do more to help students deal with anger? Where do we begin? Two quick suggestions.

First, we need to de-stigmatize anger and treat it as the normal, natural emotion we all feel—as kids and adults—and we need to redirect it. I've seen and heard a lot of folks deal with angry students by yelling back at them and getting in their faces to show them "who's in charge," and that's a terrific way to escalate things. It can turn a simmering situation into a volcanic one in an instant. So let's flip that script and ask caring questions, listen, be there, and check our own tone; that's how we can de-escalate and defuse it. Model the emotional expectation you would like to see. As a middle school assistant principal for six years, I had my share of angry kids in my office because they took their anger and lashed out in ways that were destructive to themselves, to others, to their schools, and to their futures. After we completed the disciplinary paperwork and I made phone calls home, we talked about the root of the anger—the facts of the situation—and I always reminded them, "Anger is a very natural emotion. Everyone gets angry. It's what you do with your anger that will make the biggest difference in your life. Artists get angry and create. Writers get angry and write. Musicians get angry and they make songs. Athletes get angry and they take it out on the field, the court, or the track. So what can you do, who can you talk to, what can you create with your anger the next time you feel this way?" In fact, as the parent of a seventh grade boy, I've had to give this same talk with him after he punched a wall in P.E. and broke his hand in anger. Clearly, anger is a reality in the school house and on the home front. What's also a reality is this: when we talk to kids about anger as something that's natural and normal, they will talk about it honestly and work on it with us collaboratively—as long as we continue to follow-up with them and listen.

Second, when working with an angry student, we need to remind ourselves about being this age and we need to check out the characteristics of young adolescents—specifically, their minds and their egos. From a cognitive-intellectual perspective, *This We Believe* (pgs. 53-62) reminds us that their minds process information and emotions differently, and they are prone to risk-taking behaviors. Therefore, we need to be patient with them as they misread verbal and nonverbal language, act out of anger, and then maybe reflect. We need to give them specific tools about conflict resolution, civil discourse, and mindfulness to support them in their angry moments, so they know how to respond. From the social-emotional and moral perspectives, they are deeply concerned with identity and themselves, and they are constantly trying to figure out where they stand. Therefore, we need to be patient with them and their anger as they do things to "save face" and establish and maintain their identities. We need to help them see other perspectives by sharing our own struggles and missteps and through strategies like role-play, self-compassion, and reflection activities. We need to help them understand that it's okay to be wrong. That you don't have to start hating someone because they aren't your friend right now. That anger can be a constructive tool—instead of a destructive tool. And, of course, we need to remember that young adolescents' unique characteristics don't excuse their anger; they provide us with a lens through which to understand it.

Finally, we must never forget what we were like as a young adolescent and what got us angry, how we dealt with it, and what help we wish we had on that raucous and rocky road

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