

# WORKING WITH *Aggressive* YOUTH



**Positive Strategies  
to Teach Self-Control  
and Prevent Violence**

**Daniel L. Daly, Ph.D.**

with Michael N. Sterba, M.H.D.

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Boys Town, Nebraska

## **Working with Aggressive Youth**

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# Introduction

An **EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY** snatches a basketball away from a classmate during recess. When a teacher asks him to give the ball back, the boy glares at the teacher, turns his body and the ball away, and yells, "I want it! It's mine! Leave me alone, you idiot!" He sits on the ground clutching the ball and glowers at his teacher and classmate.

A **GROUP OF THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS** are gathered in a circle at the lobby of a theater talking and laughing about the movie they just saw. Another girl from the neighborhood approaches the group and says, "That movie was great! Did you guys like it?" One of the girls in the group frowns, rolls her eyes, and shakes her head "No" to the others. No one in the group looks at the girl or responds to her question; they all start talking and laughing to each other again while slowly walking away.

A **TEN-YEAR-OLD BOY** at a long-term residential program loses his privileges because of poor grades and school misconduct. After dinner, the boy asks to go play basketball outside. When staff tell him "No," that he has extra study time to get caught up with homework, the boy starts crying and shouts, "If I can't go, I'm gonna kick your a--!" When the staff member asks the boy to calm down, he knocks over a lamp, picks it up, and hurls it at the staff member.

A **FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL** visits a social networking site on the Internet and posts insulting and vulgar comments about another female classmate. Later, the girl persuades other kids from school to help her create an online group dedicated to calling the female classmate names and spreading nasty rumors about her. Over time, as the ruthless name-calling and gossip continue to appear on the Internet and in text

*messages, the classmate becomes despondent and depressed and tries to hurt herself.*

A **FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY** threatens to shoot and kill another student who harassed and physically assaulted the boy the previous day. A teacher is tipped off about the boy's threats by other students and the police are called. They search the boy's locker and backpack and confiscate a loaded handgun. The student is arrested and transported to a juvenile detention facility.

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It's troubling to witness incidents and read stories like these and see youngsters turning to aggressive and violent acts as ways to deal with and solve their problems. But these kinds of cruel behaviors and offensive actions are occurring every day in homes, neighborhoods, schools, and cities all over the United States. Understanding and dealing with aggression and violence in children and adolescents is a difficult and complex issue. Yet, it is a problem that must be addressed and corrected if youngsters are to learn to peacefully coexist with others in society and ultimately lead happy and successful lives.

Many current trends are being blamed for today's occurrences of youth aggression and violence. Some people cite the soaring divorce rate and single-parent homes; others say youth have become desensitized to aggression and violence by what they see in the movies, on television, and in video games. The glamorization of brutal behavior that dominates certain music lyrics and videos also is seen as a culprit. Still others argue that the availability of weapons like knives and guns, or the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol have led to horrific incidents of aggressive and violent acts by children and teens.

Separately, none of these factors is probably the root cause of aggression and violence. However, it is possible that a compilation of these factors strongly influences youth who already have a propensity to use aggression as a way of coping with life's obstacles. A youth's aggressive and violent tendencies can be fueled and validated by all these influences. In other words, these kids may be getting the message that it's okay to lash out in mean, hurtful, and destructive ways.

Biology (neurotransmitters and genetics) and psychosocial processes (thoughts and feelings) often have a direct impact on a youngster's aggression problem, and they can play a crucial role in a child's treatment. However, Boys Town also believes that most youth who choose aggression and violence have learned or been taught, often unwittingly, to use these kinds of abusive behaviors by others in their environment (parents, other adults,

caregivers, siblings, friends, etc.). They learn that aggression and violence are options for solving problems from seeing others who are influential in their lives frequently use these behaviors. Most of these same aggressive and violent youngsters haven't had the opportunity to learn more positive ways of coping with and solving disagreements they have with others. These kids just don't know any other way to handle the difficult, frustrating, or upsetting situations that inevitably arise.

Boys Town knows these kids well. Our professionally trained staff have worked with and helped thousands of aggressive and violent youth in a variety of settings. As a result, Boys Town has designed and developed some excellent strategies that can help reduce aggression. These strategies are at the heart of the Boys Town Model<sup>SM</sup>, a model that teaches children and adolescents self-control and is extremely effective with aggressive youngsters.

Many youth have long histories of using aggressive behavior. Aggressive kids have learned that bullying and intimidating others or viciously lashing out when things aren't going their way is an effective method of getting what they want. Over time, these behaviors become deeply ingrained in the way these youth interact with others.

Boys Town believes that one very important component in helping children and teens overcome their aggression problems is teaching prosocial skills and behaviors that can take the place of the aggressive behaviors that have been used in the past. In addition, these same youngsters may have a certain biological condition that requires medication, or have faulty psychosocial processes that need to be corrected. Possibly expanding treatment to include all three areas not only can reduce aggression but also allow youngsters to get their needs met in a more socially acceptable manner.

Boys Town knows kids can change. We've seen it happen time and again with youngsters whom others have given up on. Throughout Boys Town's long history, many youth – including aggressive and violent kids – have learned to cope with and respond to anger, frustration, disappointment, and other unpleasant feelings in new, appropriate ways that enable them to lead happy, productive lives.

The goal of this book is to better equip caregivers with interventions, treatment options, and Treatment Plans for teaching aggressive youth how to replace unhealthy, antisocial, and destructive ways of behaving with ways that are healthy, socially acceptable, and safe. It provides a clear picture of aggression, and offers some practical, effective short- and long-term ideas and strategies for defusing aggression in youth. This approach can be used by any adult – teachers, school counselors, social workers, probation officers, psychologists, foster parents, child-care staff and administrators, and other youth care professionals – responsible for shaping children's lives.

## **What Is in This Book?**

There are three parts to this book. In the first part, Chapters 1 and 2 define what aggression is (and what it is not) and introduce and discuss two different types of aggression and how to identify each one. In addition, there is an exploration of some of the most respected and current theories about why kids become aggressive, along with the importance of understanding these reasons. Some of Boys Town's own studies will be introduced to provide insight into aggression in youth.

The second part of this book includes Chapters 3 through 8. These chapters contain a description and explanation of how to deal with aggressive behavior through the approach and proven teaching methods developed at Boys Town and incorporated into the Boys Town Model<sup>SM</sup>. There will be an explanation of each teaching method and how it helps to bring about change in a child's behavior. These methods meet a wide range of needs, from teaching skills before they will be used to correcting misbehavior to praising positive behavior. Also presented is research data that show that kids – including aggressive kids – who receive treatment that is based on the Boys Town Model get better.

Chapters 9 through 12 form the third part of this book. Here, there is a discussion of treatment planning and the various treatment strategies that can be utilized to help children and adolescents reduce aggressive behaviors. Sample Treatment Plans from a variety of settings will be presented to help caregivers see how intervention strategies can be developed for aggressive youth and used in different environments. Also, there is a social skills chart that can be used as an easy reference guide for caregivers as they teach new, prosocial skills to replace old, aggressive behaviors. This chart not only lists skills, but also shows which skills work best with specific types of aggressive behaviors.

We hope you find this book useful in your work with children and adolescents. Aggression in youngsters is an extremely troubling and complex issue in today's society, especially for those caring adults who take on this problem every day. Helping a child overcome his or her aggressive behaviors requires patience, vigilance, knowledge, and experience. Our desire is to provide some sound and useful strategies for developing clear and effective treatment interventions that can help you lead troubled youth back to the path of success.

*"Our young people are our greatest asset. Give them a chance and they will make a good account of themselves."*

– Father Edward J. Flanagan, Founder of Boys Town

**ANGRY, AGGRESSIVE, OR VIOLENT YOUTH** threaten the well-being of themselves, other children, and caregivers in any setting – schools, foster care, group homes, or mental health facilities.

They may need medication and therapy to treat their problems, but they also must learn how to control negative thoughts and emotions without turning to aggressive behavior.

## *Breaking the Cycle of* **Anger and Aggression** in Youth

The authors first offer a definition of aggression (as well as what it is not), discuss the two types of aggression, proactive and reactive, and how to identify each one, and

explore current theories of and research on aggression. The book describes practical, effective short- and long-term ideas and strategies for defusing aggression in youth based on the approach and proven teaching methods developed at Boys Town and incorporated into the Boys Town Model<sup>SM</sup>. Readers learn how to build good relationships with youth and teach them pro-social behavior. Also offered are sample Treatment Plans from a variety of settings that will help caregivers see how intervention strategies can be developed for aggressive youth and used in different environments.

Included is a social skills chart that can be used as an easy reference guide by caregivers as they teach new pro-social skills to replace old behaviors. The chart shows which skills work best with specific types of aggression and aggressive behaviors.

*Working with Aggressive Youth* can help teachers, school counselors, social workers, probation officers, psychologists, foster parents, child care staff, and administrators teach angry youth how to calm down, use self-control strategies, and solve problems in positive ways.



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