

# Heading Off Headaches

*Schools can do something about anti-social behaviours, especially if nipped in the bud.*

**By Hill M. Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank M. Gresham**

More and more children from troubled, chaotic homes are bringing well-developed patterns of anti-social behaviour to school. Especially as these students get older, they wreak havoc on schools.

Their aggressive, disruptive, and defiant behaviour wastes teaching time, disrupts the learning of all students, threatens safety, overwhelms teachers — and ruins their own chances for successful schooling and a successful life.

But it need not be this way. Most of the disruption is caused by no more than a few students per class. Provided intervention begins when these children are young, preferably before they reach age 8, the knowledge, tools, and programs exist that would enable schools to head off most of this bad behaviour — or at least greatly reduce its frequency.

Schools are not the source of children's behaviour problems, and they can't completely solve them on their own. But it is becoming clear from the research that schools can do a lot to minimize bad behaviour — and in so doing, they help not only the anti-social children, they greatly advance their central goal of educating children.

## **Academic Effectiveness**

First, and in some ways most importantly, schools can help by being academically effective. The fact is, academic achievement and good behaviour reinforce each other. Experiencing some success academically is related to decreases in acting out; conversely, learning positive behaviours is related to doing better academically.

## **Orderliness**

Schools can, to a large and surprising extent, affect the level of aggression in young boys just by the orderliness of their classrooms. Poor classroom management in grade 1 is a huge, but preventable, factor in the development of anti-social behaviour.

## **Key Features of Effective Interventions**

### **Well-Enforced School-wide Behaviour Code**

The code should consist of five to seven rules — and it's essential to carefully define and provide examples of each rule. To be effective, students must be instructed in what the code means, have opportunities to practise following the rules, have incentives for adhering to the code, and know that violating it brings consequences.

### **Social Skills Training**

Appropriate social skills must be taught, practised, and reinforced. Skills taught should include empathy, anger management, and problem-solving. They can be taught using standard instructional techniques and practised so that students not only learn new skills, but also begin using them throughout the school day and at home.

### **Adult Praise**

Praise that is behaviour-specific, and delivered in a positive and genuine fashion, is one of our most effective tools for motivating all students and teaching them important skills. Praise should be immediate, frequent, enthusiastic, descriptive, varied, and involve eye contact.

### **Reinforcement Contingencies and Response Costs**

Contingencies are arrangements in which specified, positive consequences are made available, dependent ("contingent") upon the student's performance. "Response costs" are a form of penalty whereby bad behaviour subtracts points, making it much harder to earn a reward.

### **Time-Out**

Time-out is a technique of last resort in which students are removed for just five to 15 minutes from situations in which they have trouble controlling their behaviour and/or their peers' attention is drawn to their inappropriate behaviour.

## **Interventions**

The best way to prevent anti-social behaviour is to start with an inexpensive school-wide intervention and then add on more intensive interventions for the most troubled kids. These programs improve almost all students' behaviour, but they have their greatest impact among students who are "on the margins".

### **Early Screening**

Children who have not learned appropriate, non-coercive ways to interact socially by around age 8 will likely continue displaying some degree of anti-social behaviour throughout their lives. The longer such children go without access to effective and early intervention, the more resistant to change their behaviour problems will be and the more expensive the intervention.

### **Effective Programs**

- **Second Step** is a social and emotional skills training program that can be used class-wide or school-wide from preschool through grade nine.  
[www.cfchildren.org/prgram\\_ss.shtml](http://www.cfchildren.org/prgram_ss.shtml)
- **First Step to Success** is an intensive intervention for highly-aggressive K-3 students.  
[www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=159](http://www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=159)
- **Multisystemic Therapy** is a family-focused intervention conducted by a trained therapist and aimed at the most severely at-risk youth.  
[www.mstservices.com](http://www.mstservices.com)

If there is one uncontested finding from the past 40 years of research on anti-social children, it's this: the longer students are allowed to be aggressive, defiant, and destructive, the more difficult it is to turn them around.

*(Adapted with permission from "Heading Off Disruptive Behaviour" in American Educator, the magazine of the American Federation of Teachers, Winter 2003/2004.)*