

## **Jim Larson addresses aggressive adolescents with 'Think First'**

WHITEWATER – Facing the problem of aggression and violence in middle and high schools is not easy, but Jim Larson, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater psychology professor, does just that in his recently published book, “Think First: Addressing Aggressive Behavior in Secondary Schools.” While many anger management programs primarily focus on violence prevention among young children, “Think First” shows counselors and school administrators that they cannot ignore this problem in older children.

“Nobody wants to work with older kids because the problem is well-developed and their issues with anger have been growing over many years,” Larson said. “I wanted to create a more comprehensive intervention on aggression and violence that included middle and high school kids.”

Larson’s book explains that adolescents who act aggressively in school are simply “behaviorally unskilled,” not unintelligent and not necessarily bad people. Since a lack of the right behavior skills can prevent these adolescents from succeeding in life, “Think First” explains how to identify students like this and teaches a semester-long program of skills training.

“Aggressive kids wake up and think ‘Who’s going to make me mad today?’ They must realize that they are the ones in control of their anger, not the people around them,” said Larson.

Violence has become an increased concern in both private and public schools, but Larson believes suspending aggressive students will not reduce school violence. According to him, students who get suspended over and over will not only drop out, but they will end up spending more time on the street and in situations where they practice aggressive behavior.

“Society doesn’t need that many behaviorally unskilled people walking around,” he said. “Suspending them and talking to them doesn’t teach them the skills they need to be successful in school and life.”

“Think First” began in 1989 with a partnership between Larson and Judith McBride, psychology professor at California State University-Long Beach, when they developed the Violence Prevention Program for the Milwaukee Public Schools.

“After Jim and I did research, trained teachers and developed classroom programs, we began thinking about anger coping to change kids’ mindset about how they function emotionally in schools,” said McBride.

Self-instruction through role-playing is what Larson and McBride have found works with high-risk students, those with a history of aggressive behavior. In their experience, putting students in controlled situations where they would normally become angry and having them role-play nonaggressive solutions helps the students experience and practice positive behavior skills. It also shows the students that they can control their own anger by thinking nonaggressive thoughts.

Larson and McBride have taught their anger coping program to counselors, psychologists and school administrators across the United States, particularly in Milwaukee and Long Beach, Calif.

“I’ve trained as many as 200 school psychologists to do this program,” said McBride. “It is very popular all over the state of California and schools are actually doing the program.” Some intervention tips that Larson suggests in “Think First” include:

- \* Using incentives, such as a point system with prizes and snacks.
- \* Filling out “hassle logs” to track confrontational situations and aggressive feelings that occur outside of the group intervention.
- \* Brainstorming and discussing nonaggressive solutions to different situations and role-playing them.
- \* Practicing self-calming and self-talk to show that each individual has control over his or her feelings.
- \* Ending sessions with relaxation exercises and assignments that challenge the students to practice positive behavior outside of the group.

On tackling the problem of working with older kids, McBride said, “It is very difficult to keep track of them because they are continually transferred from one school to another, given up on and kicked out.” She added, “Teaching a set of skills that can be practiced can impact the way a teenager thinks and help him or her get through life.”

Larson is also director of the school psychology program at UW-Whitewater, a member of the Scientific Board of the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment of Victims of Violence and co-author of “Helping School-children Cope with Anger: A Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention.”

“I see my role as a scholar as being the bridge between basic research and the practitioners in schools,” he said. “I tried to bring the information from the last book and past research more up-to-date and consumable for the average reader,” Larson said about writing “Think First.”

As for the future, Larson does not guarantee another book, but is becoming

increasingly interested with the alternatives to suspension and believes schools need a set of disciplinary structures to keep adolescents off the streets.

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