



Preventing Aggression in Adolescence Through Self-Compassion

Senior Project

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Abstract

Aggression in adolescents can be a problem in schools. This paper proposes an intervention to help work with these students to allow them to gain the skills they need to become less aggressive. Students will be identified by their teachers as exhibiting aggressive behaviors and will be given the option of participating in the program. The proposed intervention uses the six components of self-compassion as learning tools to help students develop less aggressive behaviors. The proposed intervention is six weeks with one session each week. The six components of self-compassion are to be used as stepping stones to help the students better understand themselves and their emotions. To measure this, a self-compassion scale and an aggression scale will be used at both the beginning and end of the intervention. The proposed intervention should provide students with skills to better understand and deal with their emotions. Following the intervention, the students should be less aggressive and more self-compassionate.

Keywords: Intervention, Aggression, Adolescence, Self-Compassion

Preventing Aggression in Adolescence Through Self-Compassion

When looking at aggressive behaviors in adolescents it is beneficial to look at what can cause the aggressive behaviors. Some causes can be wanting acceptance from peers and lack of emotional regulation (Aslund, Starrin, Leppert, & Nilsson, 2009; Batanova & Loukas, 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Estévez, Jiménez, & Moreno, 2018). Aggression tends to peak in middle adolescence (Batanova & Loukas, 2016; Van den Burg, Burk, & Cillessen, 2019). Aggression can be broken down into categories of physical, mental, or verbal aggression (Batanova & Loukas, 2016). Aggression during adolescence can continue into adulthood (Bluth, Campo, Futch, & Gaylord, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand that self-compassion can help with aggression (Bluth et al., 2017). Aggression can be combated by self-compassion in many ways as it promotes coping habits that allow an individual to experience emotional pain and turn it into a lesson while understanding that everyone experiences hard points in life (Bluth, et al., 2017; Pullmer, Chung, Samson, Balanji, & Zaitsoff, 2019). Self-compassion has six components that work together to create a self-compassionate mindset (Neff, 2003b). By using these six components as a base, a six-week intervention is proposed with each session focusing on one of the six components of self-compassion.

Causes of Aggression in Adolescents

Adolescents seek more acceptance from their peers as they transition from childhood through puberty and into adulthood (Aslund et al., 2009; Batanova & Loukas, 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Estévez et al., 2018). Therefore, in addition to home stressors, adolescents also experience stressors wherever peers are present,

such as at school (Bluth, et al., 2017). This desire to be accepted by peers may lead to an aggressive response if the adolescent feels that their goal of acceptance is not being met (Bluth, et al., 2017). Aggression can result from feelings of rejection, humiliation, social rejection, depression, shame, low life satisfaction, and low levels of empathy (Aslund et al., 2009; Batanova & Loukas, 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Estévez, et al., 2018). Aggression can also be linked to a perceived threat from an individual due to a social interaction that was misinterpreted (Batanova & Loukas, 2016). An adolescent can exhibit aggressive behavior in two different ways: proactive aggression and reactive aggression, both of which give the adolescent a way of coping with their emotions (Van den Burg, et al., 2019). Proactive aggression is more goal orientated and can be used to gain status or obtain some type of reward (Van den Burg, et al., 2019). Reactive aggression is often shown in defense to a threat that may or may not exist or because of frustration due to not being able to process emotions (Van den Burg, et al., 2019).

Effects of Aggression on Adolescents

Aggression can lead to emotional regulation issues, psychological difficulties, and health issues in adulthood (Estévez, Jiménez, & Moreno, 2018). Due to aggression causing feelings of inequality and violence, children and adolescents who display this behavior may end up in jail during adulthood (Aslund et al., 2009). Feelings of inequality result from feeling left out of a group and being taken advantage of (Aslund et al., 2009). Psychosocial behaviors of inequality and violence continue during adolescence, it is likely that the aggressive behaviors will continue once the adolescent becomes an adult (Aslund et al., 2009; Bluth, et al., 2017).

Aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents are linked to lower academic rates but a more positive outlook towards school interactions (Estévez, et al., 2018). This positive outlook is counterintuitive because the child or adolescent who is exhibiting the aggressive behavior tends to have a lower perception of teacher support during this time (Estévez, et al., 2018). This positive outlook could result from a desire to escape from their family interactions (Estévez, et al., 2018). These individuals could be seeking sensations of excitement or risk by using aggression to gain a reaction out of others (Wang et al., 2009).

Parental and Peer Roles in Aggression

Adolescents tend to lean on their parents for attachments, finding their identity, and to develop themselves during their earlier stages of life (Laible, Gustavo, & Roesch, 2004). During this time, parents are the model for their child's behaviors and the children are constantly learning from them (Laible, et al., 2004). The formation of the adolescent's autonomy, support and comfort comes from what a child models from their parent's behavior during their earlier stages of life (Laible, et al., 2004). Chronic family stressors such as living in poverty, parental disagreements, and divorce could lead to aggression in adolescents (Bluth, et al., 2017). As the children become older, they start to look towards their peers for guidance as to how they should behave as well (Laible, et al., 2004). The adolescents' peers help them learn autonomy, gain support, and have comfort as they grow (Laible, et al., 2004). Proactive and reactive aggression can occur with perceive lack of support from peers (Van den Burg, et al., 2019).

Empathy and Aggression in Adolescents

Empathy involves sharing feelings of understanding with another person (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007). Empathy is linked to lower levels of aggression because individuals are better able to understand others' emotions (Gini, et al, 2007; Castillo, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2013). There are two types of empathy, the ability to relate to others experiences and being able to understand another person's emotions (Gini, et al., 2007).

Aggression is caused by a lack of empathetic abilities and can often be interpreted as a prosocial behavior (Gini, et al.; Castillo, et al., 2013). Aggression can lead to social power by allowing for a person to gain support from their peers due to intimidation (Gini, et al.; Castillo, et al., 2013). This interpretation of being a prosocial behavior can stem from not being able to understand others' emotions and instead of seeing peers as afraid of being victims of aggression, they can be seen as "friends" (Castillo, et al., 2013). Another way that lack of empathy can lead to aggression is because the individual is unable to understand and voice their own emotions (Castillo, et al., 2013).

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion can help with combating aggression in adolescents due to promoting understanding of and being able to voice the emotions that can cause aggression (Castillo, et al., 2013; Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion also allows for an individual to care for themselves as a priority and feel connected to others (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). Self-compassion is made up of six components which include self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification (Neff, 2003b). These six components are mirrors of each other

with three being positive (e.g., self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and three being negative (e.g., self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification) (Neff, 2003b).

Self-kindness involves actively caring for oneself when dealing with pain rather than ignoring it or judging oneself for it (Neff, 2003b). In order for self-kindness to work, an individual has to be gentle with themselves and be more accepting of their experiences (Germer & Neff, 2019). Being kind to oneself allows for emotional pain to be completely and thoroughly processed (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014). Self-kindness allows for one to show kindness to themselves and understand their own emotions (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014, Neff, 2003b). Self-kindness promotes an understanding of failure (Neff, 2003b). Self-kindness allows for one to forgive personal failures and apply gentleness and patience when dealing with one's own short comings in a healthy manner (Neff, 2003b). An understanding of oneself as a priority rather than a second thought is important when dealing with self-kindness because it allows for an individual to find ways to positively deal with their emotions (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). When working with self-kindness, it is important to understand that the individual needs to be more encouraging to themselves, as if they were talking to someone else (Neff & Dahm, 2014). Self-kindness also allows an emotional safety net of positive coping to gather a clear understanding of the self (Cassisa & Neff, 2019; Neff, 2003b). An increased change in negative behaviors allows for growth for an individual's more positive behaviors (Neff, 2003b).

Self-judgment comes from feelings of fear, one's own ego, self-indulgence, and self-centeredness (Neff, 2003b). Self-judgment causes an individual to dwell on

their own short-comings and treat themselves badly (Germer & Neff, 2019). When it comes to self-judgment, individuals tend to belittle themselves (Neff & Dahm, 2014). This belittling that stems from self-judgment causes individuals to have an inflated ego to protect themselves from self-induced punishments (Neff, 2003b; Neff & Dahm, 2014). These self-induced punishments come from feeling of the person is not good enough (Neff & Dahm, 2014). When using self-judgment, it does not allow for one's negative traits to be challenged and changed (Neff, 2003b). The lack of challenge and changed behavior would not allow for growth as the individual would become stuck using more unhealthy coping mechanisms when dealing with their emotions (Neff, 2003b).

Common humanity involves recognizing that suffering is part of the common human experience (Cassisa & Neff, 2019; Neff, 2003b). Every single person in the world suffers and it is part of being human that an individual must accept (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). No one has the perfect life and everyone has their own short-comings to deal with (Germer & Neff, 2019). The understanding of common humanity links to compassion as it allows for an insight of another person's pain (Neff, 2003b). The common human experience includes suffering, failure, and pain (Neff, 2003b). Common humanity helps with understanding that everyone gets disappointed in life sometimes (Neff & Dahm, 2014). This disappointment is part of what makes individuals human (Neff & Dahm, 2014). In practicing common humanity, one understands that everyone deserves compassion (Neff, 2003b). Knowing that failure is what makes us human is another aspect of common humanity (Neff, 2003b). Therefore, there is less judgment for themselves and less judgment of others

because of the comparison (Neff, 2003b). There is an understanding that comes with common humanity that no person can be perfect and instead, everyone is imperfect (Neff & Dahm, 2014). Common humanity focuses on the interconnectedness of individuals and their equality (Neff, 2003b).

Isolation can be caused by a lack of interconnectedness and self-pity (Neff, 2003b). Isolation can cause an individual to feel like they are the only ones who are suffering and have failed in life (Germer & Neff, 2019). These feelings of self-pity can cause an individual to become disconnected from their group and to feel as if they are alone (Neff, 2003b). Individuals can often feel as if they are the only one's dealing with suffering when a problem arises (Neff & Dahm, 2014). They tend to separate themselves from others rather than allowing for the emotions to process (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014, Neff, 2003b). These feelings can also cause a disconnectedness that can lead an individual to become completely focused on a problem and forget that there are others around that can help them (Neff, 2003b). This disconnect can increase egocentric feelings and can cause feelings of suffering to become exacerbated due to a perceived lack of support from other individuals (Neff, 2003b). Being disconnected from others can cause an individual to think that they are different from others during their time of suffering (Neff & Dahm, 2014).

Mindfulness uses self-compassion in order to help individuals focus less on the specific emotions that generate from a problem and instead allows for a broader understanding as they can focus on the problem clearly (Neff, 2003b). Being mindful allows for an individual to have a more balanced view when looking at their lives and problems (Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff & Dahm, 2014). Mindfulness encourages

an understanding of the individual's own feelings to better understand and feel compassion for others (Neff, 2003b). Mindfulness calls for an individual to accept pain as a part of the path to changing (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). To be mindful means increasing awareness of emotions without becoming consumed by them, which can then allow for negative traits to be challenged in a healthy manner (Neff, 2003b). An individual must be willing to tune into their pain and feelings of suffering in order to be mindful of themselves (Neff & Dahm, 2014). Mindfulness involves work to accept and understand negative emotions that an individual may feel when dealing with themselves (Neff, 2003b). Without being mindful, painful experiences cannot be processed completely and cannot be understood to their fullest extent (Neff, 2003b).

Overidentification is the dissociation of emotions that an individual is experiencing (Neff, 2003b). Overidentification does not allow for a broader view of what an individual is going through and therefore, they focus exclusively on their experience and cannot approach a problem logically (Neff, 2003b). Individuals tend to get overwhelmed by their experience and cannot think past their own feelings (Neff & Dahm, 2014). This lack of logical thinking occurs because the problem becomes the center of the individual's life (Neff, 2003b). The overidentification makes it so that an individual feels alone when dealing with experiences and that they cannot go to another person for help or advice (Neff, 2003b). Overidentification can cause an individual to dramatize their suffering when dealing with it (Germer & Neff, 2019). It makes painful experiences unacceptable and therefore, there is a lack of emotional understanding (Neff, 2003b).

How Can Self-Compassion Help with Aggression?

Self-compassion leads to less aggression as the individual learns how to navigate their emotions while promoting inclusivity of understanding why they feel the way they feel (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014; Neff, 2003b). Self-compassionate people feel like they are a part of a community rather than feeling like they have been excluded from the group (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014; Neff, 2003b; & Pullmer et al., 2019). Therefore, self-compassion helps with an individual's mood stability (Bluth, Mullarkey, & Lathren, 2018). Self-compassion can also be linked with other coping mechanisms that are considered positive such as problem-solving, acceptance, and reliance while reducing the more negative coping habits such as aggression (Neff, 2003b; & Pullmer et al., 2019).

When using self-compassion to reduce aggression individuals are less likely to experience anxiety, stress, depression, fear of failure, and harsh self-criticism (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Pullmer et al., 2019). Self-compassion takes painful experiences and emotional pain and turns them into learning experiences for an individual (Neff, 2003b; Pullmer et al., 2019). These learning experiences of painful emotions and experiences allow for self-compassion to combat more negative emotions that come with failing and therefore, allows for a more compassionate understanding that humans in general all experience failure (Játiva, & Cerezo, 2014; Neff, 2003b; Pullmer et al., 2019). Having high self-compassion allows for a greater life satisfaction along with more emotional intelligence which can lower aggression levels and an individual's perceived stress (MacBeth, & Gumley, 2012).

Need for Intervention

A self-compassion intervention is needed for a number of reasons. One reason is that adolescents with aggressive tendencies have lower academic scores which will affect them later in life when they try to get a job or get into college (Estévez, et al., 2018). Another reason is that adolescents with aggressive tendencies are likely to continue having these tendencies into adulthood which can cause issues for them when going into the work force (Bluth et al., 2017). It can also lead these adolescents to become involved in criminal behaviors when they get older as they may have issues in adulthood (Aslund et al., 2009; Estévez, et al., 2018). Self-compassion can help with these aggressive behaviors by promoting healthy coping mechanisms for learning how to better understand their emotions (Neff, 2003b). Using self-compassion can help adolescents gain self-awareness when working with emotions because it allows for exploration of the negative emotion rather than just cutting the emotion off and building a wall against it (Neff, 2003b).

Proposed Intervention

Participants

Participants will be school age children ranging from 11-14 years of age. There will be five to six students in the intervention group. They will have to be noted to have aggressive tendencies by the school's staff. These aggressive tendencies will be measured by a pre-test and post-test. Therefore, when the students are picked, the researcher will gain consent from the parents or guardian of each child and assent from the students themselves.

Measures

These measures will be given at the beginning of the intervention and the end of the intervention. To measure aggression levels, students would complete Orpinas and Frankowski's (2001) aggression scale. This scale asks students to rank themselves from 1 which is the least to 6 or more which is the highest frequency of the aggressive behaviors being presented. There are 11 questions within the scale that cover behaviors such as teasing, getting angry, and hitting someone else. The scale asks these students how often each of the 11 items occur over a seven-day period. An example of the questions that are asked on the scale are as follows, "I pushed or shoved other students".

Self-compassion will be measured using Neff's (2003a) measures of self-compassion. There are 26 items used on the scale to measure the six components of self-compassion. The 26 items are measured on a 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always) scale. These 26 items cover a variety of questions fitting the six components of self-compassion. Self-kindness is measured by using a question such as "I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like". Self-judgement is measured by asking a question such as "When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself". Common humanity is measured using a question such as "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition". Isolation is measured using a question like "When I fail at something that's important to me I tend to feel alone in my failure". Mindfulness is measured with a question like "When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective". Lastly, overidentification is measured using a question such as "When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings."

Intervention Program

During the intervention, there will be six sessions over six weeks. Each of these sessions will be focused on one of the six components of self-compassions: Self-kindness, Self-judgment, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, and Overidentification. The goals of the program are to lower aggression and improve self-compassion when working with these adolescents. This intervention will focus on adolescents who have been noted by teachers as having aggressive tendencies. This group will be composed of five to six students for the entirety of the intervention.

Week one will be focused on the self-kindness portion of the intervention. Before the intervention starts, there will be an introduction between the people within the closed group setting. During this time, the students and the intervention leader will determine rules for the group. The students will also complete both the self-compassion and aggression scales for their pre-tests. After this is completed, students will be asked to complete an activity in which they write down three different traits that they like about themselves. After writing down those traits, the group will discuss how easy or difficult it was to write about those traits that they liked about themselves. After this, a definition of self-kindness would be given. This discussion and definition will be used as a way to start a discussion about how they think about themselves and how to start being kinder to one's self. During this, the group will discuss how to go about changing their own perspectives about themselves.

Week two, will be focused on self-judgment. This week will be used as a comparison to week one. The group leader will give the meaning of self-judgment. During this week, the students in the group will be asked to write down three traits that they dislike about themselves. Compared to last week, there will be a discussion about which was easier, writing traits they liked about themselves or traits they disliked about themselves. This activity will allow for a continued discussion about how to change one's self-perspective.

Week three will be focused on the aspect of common humanity. Starting with the meaning of common humanity, the group will talk about significant experiences that involved pain and suffering. After that, the group leaders will ask the individuals in the group if they have been through any similar experiences as those talked about in the group. This discussion will focus on how similar experiences while they may be slightly different, are all a part of one's life. The group should learn that many experiences one may go through are shared and are a part of life.

Week four will be aimed at understanding isolation and how it makes one feel. The beginning of the weekly meeting will start with the meaning of isolation. During this week, the group will be asked about the times that they felt that they were completely alone. This will open up discussion for how being alone can make an individual feel. The discussion will also focus on how being alone and feeling like an outsider to a group, in this case their peers, may make them feel. This discussion will allow for students to explore their feelings of loneliness within a group setting and gather support from others in the group.

Week five will be focused on mindfulness. In the beginning of the meeting, a definition of mindfulness will be given. Due to working with students, the focus will be to work on problem solving. During this meeting, the group will discuss how to be mindful when interacting with others. The main focus will be on interacting with others during problematic times with mindful behaviors rather than reacting aggressively. There will be a discussion about how to use problem solving skills to help with their emotional regulation. This week will be focused on working around their aggressive behaviors when dealing with other people.

Week six will be working with overidentification. In the beginning of the session, a definition of overidentification would be given and talked about. During this week, there will be a discussion about how to separation one's self from a difficult issue. There will be a discussion about boundaries and how they should be made and used when dealing with others so that they do not get overwhelmed and lose themselves. At the end of the discussion about boundaries, the group leader will ask about the group's advantages and disadvantages. The students will also be given the post-test for self-compassion and for aggressive behaviors to see where they compare from the first week to the last week.

Proposed Results and Discussion

At the end of this intervention, students are expected to have lower levels of aggression and higher levels of self-compassion when taking the post test. There is the chance that self-compassion will not decrease aggression levels but it may increase self-acceptance and compassion. This would be shown in the self-compassion scale and would allow for the researcher to see the results and come to

an understanding of what may have happened. There are some issues to keep in mind when working with these students. One issue is that the student must agree to try and participate in the group setting. This could be an issue as the student may not find their behavior to be detrimental to their well-being. Another issue to keep in mind is that the intervention does involve talking about sensitive subjects and that these students may feel uncomfortable talking about their problems or their lives. It is important for the individual who is giving the intervention to make sure that the students understand that what is shared and talked about in the group does not leave the group. Also, the intervention focuses on adolescents who are aggressive as noted by their teachers. It is possible that even though nominated by a teacher, the students may not be aggressive or there may be some students who are aggressive but not put into the intervention. Another limitation is that these students may show progress during the intervention but the progress may not be long-term. There is currently no way to know if a student who has been in the intervention continues to benefit over the long-term as there is no follow up process once the intervention ends.

Conclusion

When it comes to working with adolescents, self-compassion could be a helpful intervention. Teaching about the six components of self-compassion and how they relate to each other may allow for students who display aggressive tendencies to become less aggressive. Each of the six components of self-compassion can be used to help these students gain understanding of themselves and their emotions (Neff, 2003b). By using a self-compassion scale and an

aggression scale, the researcher can see where the students fall before and after the intervention is over. Our hypothesis is that students will become less aggressive and more self-compassionate. However, there is a chance that might not be the case. The students could become more self-compassionate without changing their behaviors. Multiple issues such as students' perception of behavior and the sensitivity of the topics being discussed are considered before the intervention is put into place.

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