Coping with Antisocial Children

Elizabeth Ramsey and Gerald R. Patterson

A three-part intervention program may succeed where detentions and suspensions have failed.

Eleven-year-old James strolls into his classroom a few minutes late wearing headphones. This is the fourth time this week that he returned late from lunch. His teacher asks him to take the headphones off so she can begin class. James doesn't answer. The teacher repeats the request twice, but still James doesn't acknowledge her. Finally, with a rising pitch and an edge to her voice, she shouts, "I've already asked you three times to take that thing off. With behavior like this you'll be in the principal's office in no time!" James grumbles something the teacher can't quite hear and reluctantly takes off the headphones. He then slinks to his desk as she begins class while glaring his way. For the remainder of the day James sits at his desk and stares out the window.

The main problem here was that James was late to class. But he needed to take off his headphones to comply with class rules. Asking James in a pleasant way to take off the headphones didn't work and neither did nagging. Perhaps James has learned that the teacher doesn't really expect him to comply until she yells and screams. Meanwhile, the real problem of tardiness is never addressed.

Antisocial children like James, who display behavior patterns such as aggression, theft, noncompliance, lying, and truancy, represent a major social problem in today's society. Over two million juvenile arrests are made each year for crimes ranging from school vandalism and drug abuse to robbery and forcible rape. Students displaying even minor forms of antisocial behavior are among the first to be referred to special education and among the last to be mainstreamed back into the regular classroom. It is not surprising that teachers find antisocial students extremely difficult to cope with in the classroom. The usual punishments, such as detention or suspension, seem to have virtually no effect on the behavior of these students.

In the past, a child's antisocial behavior was thought to reflect some internal force (frustration, libido, anger, or anxiety) that was manifested as noncompliance or aggression. The child's lack of internal controls and crumbling ego were thought to be distant reflections of parental neurosis. Intensive therapy for parents was designed to correct their neuroses. The problem with this therapy is that it does not work. None of dozens of studies has shown any effect from treatment based on this approach.

A Process Called Coercion

James' interaction with his teacher is typical of students in the early stages of antisocial behavior, and it is that kind of interaction which we believe underlies the development of antisocial behavior and delinquency. This type of interaction between antisocial children and their parents and teachers occurs as part of an ongoing process of many small events that eventually produces dramatic changes in behavior. The process is called coercion and describes the way children are inadvertently taught to be negative toward other people.

As part of this process children learn to be verbally and even physically abu-

Elizabeth Ramsey is a post-doctorate fellow at the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene, Oregon.

Gerald R. Patterson is director of the Oregon Social Learning Center.

sive toward parents, siblings, and school personnel while avoiding work and responsibilities. Coercive behavior involves using nagging, yelling, temper tantrums, and other negative actions to intimidate the other person and to get what they want.

Climbing to Failure

The antisocial ladder (*Figure 1*) shows how antisocial behavior progresses over time and how this development is accompanied by academic and peer problems. The climb from antisocial behavior to delinquency includes a series of steps or stages. The longer a student remains on the ladder, the greater the risk of more extreme forms of deviant behavior and eventual incarceration.

Children on *Step 1* of the antisocial ladder often come from home settings where unemployment, marital conflict, and financial problems are common. Their parents often use ineffective discipline techniques, such as not backing up threats, being inconsistent, and using extreme punishments.

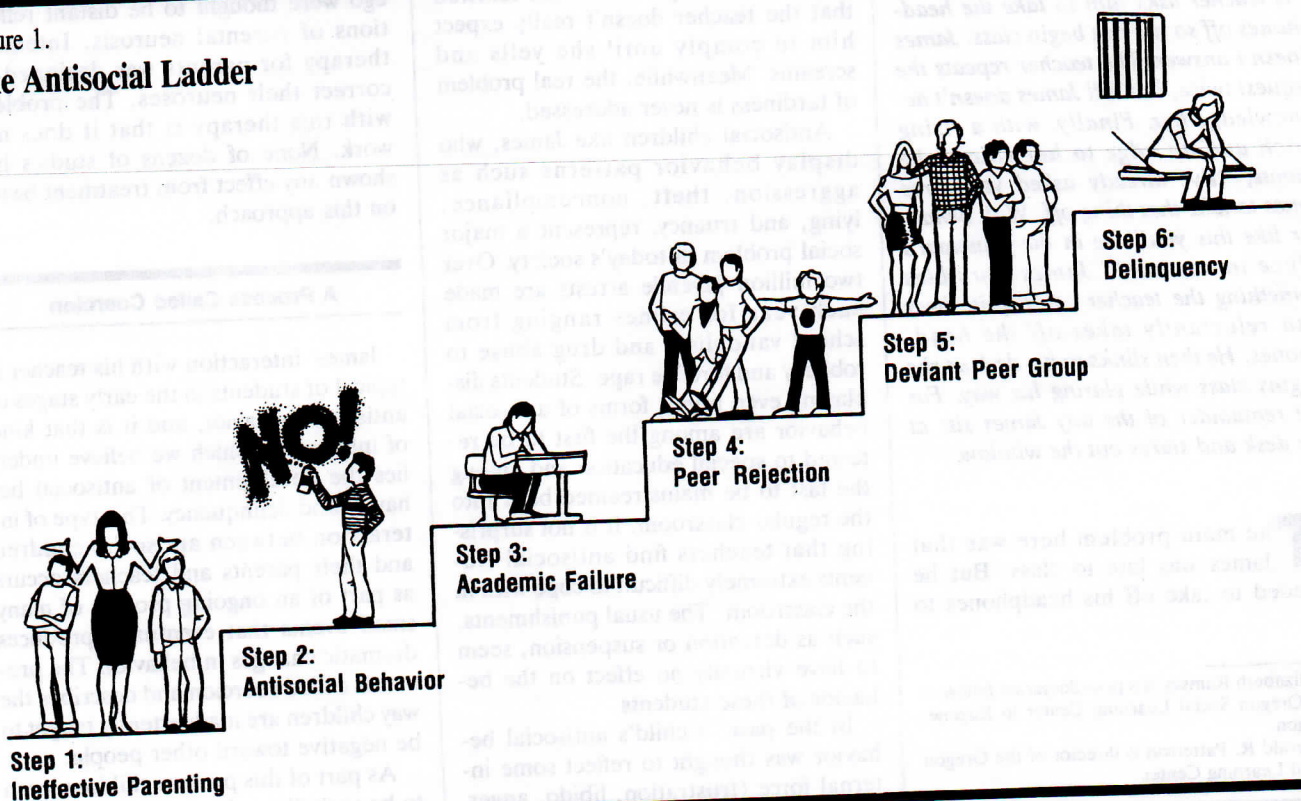
Step 2 characteristics, such as whining, fighting, yelling, and noncompliance, often are early indicators of antisocial behavior in children exposed to ineffective parenting and extreme stress at home.

Step 3, academic failure, is characteristic of antisocial children early in the elementary grades and often becomes worse as the student progresses. The more severe the antisocial behavior, the more deficient the students' performance at school. Antisocial students are often truant and also seem to lack basic academic survival skills such as attending to the teacher, remaining in-seat, and answering questions appropriately. One hypothesis is that as these students become more and more difficult to deal with in the classroom, teachers begin to avoid interacting with them, thus reducing the proportion of teaching time allotted to each problem student.

Steps 4 and 5 of the antisocial ladder are highly related. The order of these steps is important in that a child is not accepted into the deviant peer group (*Step 5*) until he or she is rejected by the normal peer group *(Step 4)*. It has been well documented in the literature on social deviance that aggressive types of behavior cause peer rejection. Apparently, antisocial children lack the basic social skills needed to get along with others, such as conversing, understanding group norms, responding to provocation, and interacting positively. Once antisocial students have been rejected by their peers, they drift toward other children who display similar undesired behaviors. The deviant peer group provides adolescent students with the attitudes, motivations, and rationalizations to sustain their antisocial behavior. It is here that the antisocial adolescent receives training for delinquency and substance abuse.

Antisocial adolescents who have moved into a deviant peer group are not responsive to existing treatments. They soon progress to *Step 6* by participating in a wide variety of delinquent acts, accompanied by high rates of substance abuse. As adults they will suffer from high rates of unemployment, marital problems, and psychiatric illness. Eventually these students will have children of their own, and the antisocial cycle will begin again.

Figure 1.
The Antisocial Ladder



What we have tried to demonstrate with the antisocial ladder is that these kinds of children do not outgrow their problems on their own. While the nature of the problem may change over time, the deviant status does not. Principals and teachers cannot ignore these problems, which can be extremely serious. Antisocial behavior must be addressed as early as possible, on the first rungs of the ladder.

Unfortunately, school interventions too often have focused on the individual child with minimal parent involvement; all the responsibility for change is placed on the student. Although one-on-one counseling might be beneficial for some students, a more economical approach is to help arrest the development of antisocial behavior through a three-part treatment program of parent training, remediation of academic deficits, and help with social skills.

Parent Training. This involves procedures in which parents are taught specific techniques for improving their day-to-day effectiveness with their children. First, parents learn how to track behavior. It is critical that they know whether or not their child is doing required chores or homework. They must also be taught how to monitor the whereabouts and peer relationships of older children. Next, parents are taught to consistently reinforce good behavior. They are shown ways to use nonphysical but effective punishments such as privilege removal for undesired behaviors. Finally, parents learn how to solve social problems that might arise as their child approaches adolescence.

Because many families resist participation, a variety of inducements is often necessary. Techniques vary from nominal payments to school pressure to court orders. While this last measure may seem drastic, it is often a necessary step to improving relations within highly chaotic or abusive families. Less drastic measures for reducing parental resistance to training include encouraging the counselors to sympathize with the family and adapting the training to fit family needs.

"Schools will reap immediate benefits from decreases in antisocial behavior, including greater teacher satisfaction and less school vandalism, and society will benefit from reductions in the costs of the criminal justice system."

Remediation of Academic Difficulties. The second component for a successful school intervention package should include some form of remediation for the large group of antisocial students who are behind academically. An added benefit of such an approach is that improved academic skills are coupled with success. In addition to providing systematic instruction for antisocial students, teachers trained in behavior management techniques can prevent many problems by providing specific classroom rules, giving clear directions, and effectively using praise.

Social Skills Training. The final component for effective intervention, this training is by far the most difficult one but is necessary if antisocial students are to learn to interact positively with nondeviant peers. In the social skills curriculum ACCEPTS, for example, students are taught specific skills in five major areas: classroom skills, basic interaction skills, getting-along skills, making-friends skills, and coping skills.

Usually, social skills instruction occurs in small groups, but it can be used in one-to-one, large group, or entire classroom instructional formats. Classes usually last 45 minutes per day for approximately four to seven weeks. Although short-term improvement in antisocial behavior usually follows completion of a social skills program, long-term changes are not evident unless combined with parent training and academic improvements.

To be sure, this three-part program can be viewed as just another set of demands placed on schools. But unlike requests for more art, more music education, and more extracurricular activities, the reduction of antisocial behavior has direct and profound social consequences. Schools will reap immediate benefits from decreases in antisocial behavior, including greater teacher satisfaction and less school vandalism, and society will benefit from reductions in the costs of the criminal justice system. □

REFERENCES

Chamberlain, P. and Baldwin, D. V. "Client Resistance to Parent Training: Its Therapeutic Management." In *Advances in School Psychology, Vol. VI,* edited by T. R. Kratochwill. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988.

Dodge, K. A. "Behavioral Antecedents of Peer Social Status." *Child Development* 54 (1983): 1386-1399.

Elliott, D. S.; Huizinga, D.; and Ageton, S. S. *Explaining Delinquency and Drug Use.* Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1985.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States: Uniform Crime Reports, 1986.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987.

Hersh, R. and Walker, H. M. "Great Expectations: Making Schools Effective for All Children." *Policy Studies Review* 2 (1983): 147-188.

Kazdin, A. E. "Treatment of Antisocial Behavior in Children: Current Status and Future Directions." *Psychological Bulletin* 102 (1987): 187-203.

Loeber, R. "Patterns of Development of Antisocial Child Behavior." *Annals of Child Development* 2 (1985): 77-116.

Patterson, G. R. *Coercive Family Process.* Eugene, Ore.: Castalia, 1982.

Patterson, G. R. and Forgatch, M. *Parents and Adolescents Living Together. Part I: The Basics.* Eugene, Ore.: Castalia, 1987.

Patterson, G. R.; Reid, J. B.; and Dishion, T. J. *Antisocial Boys.* Eugene, Ore.: Castalia, in press.

Walker, H. M. et al. *The Walker Social Skills Curriculum: The ACCEPTS Program.* Austin, Tex.: Pro-Ed Publishers, 1983.

Wilson, J. Q. and Herrnstein, R. J. *Crime and Human Nature.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.