

Resiliency and Aggression Replacement Training® with Families

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It is necessary as change agents that we align with the family and provide the necessary skill and support for protection and development of their children.



Every child needs a strong, loving relationship with a parent or other adult to feel safe and secure and feel a sense of trust.

~Arnold P. Goldstein

Aggression Replacement Training® (ART) is a psychoeducational approach to working with young people who experience difficulties with interpersonal relationships and prosocial behavior. ART® originated with Skillstreaming (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997) and developed into a three-component model (Glick & Gibbs, 2011; Goldstein & Glick, 1987; Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998).

Goldstein recognized that the complex problems of youth would not yield to simplistic narrow approaches. Instead, he formulated a three-part multi-modal approach to problems in behavior, emotions, and thinking: **Skillstreaming** targets social skills and behavior, **Anger Control** training focuses on regulation of emotions, and **Moral Reasoning** focuses on values and cognitions.

ART® explicitly teaches an array of prosocial psychological skills to youth who have specified areas of need. Training is developed in a series of structured learning groups where youth are: 1) shown examples of expert use of the behaviors that constitute the skills in which they are deficient (i.e., modeling); 2) given guided opportunities to practice and

rehearse these competent behaviors (i.e., role playing, self-talk); 3) provided with reinforcement, instruction, and performance feedback on how well they performed their role playing enactment; and 4) encouraged to engage in a series of activities designed to increase the chances that the skills learned in the training setting will endure and transfer to their home, school, community, and other real-world settings.

Aggression Replacement Training® is currently a Model Program for the United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the United Kingdom Home Office. It is also rated as a Promising Approach by the United States Department of Education. The provision of ART® should not occur in a vacuum. The ultimate test of any intervention is the ability for the learning to be transferred and generalized. A transfer coach is any individual who either works with or crosses the path of a child in the course of any given day that can reinforce a given skill for proficiency.

Parents can be very efficient transfer coaches given the significant amount of time they can spend with their children. Well known Russian developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, who is generally regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on System Theory, focused on the interaction between research and policy on childhood development. He suggested through ecological systems theory that interventions are enhanced and implemented at higher levels when we better understand the ecology (home, school, peers) that a child engages with on a daily basis. The focus on and the ability for parents to act as transfer coaches and also gain knowledge and skill in the modules of ART® only increases the probability that the outcomes will be successful. Often, as we work with families of children with specific deficiencies, parents may have similar areas of need. ART® and Family TIES (Teaching In Essential Skills) provide for the development of concurrent skill proficiency with children and parents.

The family possesses the power to support their children.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that social problems like aggression are influenced at multiple levels. The interaction of characteristics within the individual, the individual's family, the neighborhood, and society may all contribute to the problem. According to this ecological framework, interventions will be more successful if they target more than one level. Resiliency experts note that relationships with positive adults

in the home, school, and community are protective factors which work to help youth overcome or be less seriously affected by adverse situations and conditions they experience throughout their development (Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 2001). Cognizant of this reality, the authors target families, schools, and communities for intervention transfer in addition to individual youth.

The Resilient Child

In *Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare*, a protective factor of paramount importance emerges clearly identifying that resilience of youth in care or youth who face adversity is strongly related to positive relationships (Flynn, Dudding, & Barber, 2006).

In *Vulnerable but Invincible*, Werner and Smith (1982) identified a series of discriminators that significantly differentiate between resilient youth and peers showing serious coping problems. In this study, youth have grown up in environments characterized by problems in parental relationships, parent absence, parent mental illness, financial problems, serious illness during adolescence, teenage pregnancy, and numerous other life stresses. When examining what contributes to resiliency, Werner (2005) identifies what factors impact the resilient child. The strength of parental bond established in the first three years of life tends to influence future success almost more than any other factor. According to Arnold Goldstein, "Serious attempts to alter antisocial behaviors for the better must be directed toward youth and toward significant people (e.g., parents, peers) in the youth's lives," (Goldstein et al., 1998, p. 170).

In an effort to maximize the gains we know are possible in Skillstreaming, Anger Control, Moral Reasoning, and other Prepare Curriculum competencies (Goldstein, 1998), the engagement of families is crucial. "We have come to realize that lasting change is only facilitated when helping professionals interested in the troubled young person are involved with the total family system," (Garfat, McElwee, 2001, pp. 237-238). Parents report that not only is there improvement with skill proficiency with the identified child but residual gains with siblings. The family possesses the power to support their children and we can teach similar competencies to the parents alongside their children. It has become clear from working with families that "for behavioral change to occur, transfer and maintenance of ART® skills are critical. Parents and family are the best change agents we have to ensure that skills taught to youth are effectively used, when

youths leave our care to return to their homes and communities” (Calame & Parker, 2004, p. 226). It is with this understanding that the following strategies target the alliance of troubled youth and their families toward improved family functioning.

Effective Use of Family Skills Training

Family skills training is gaining popularity for high risk groups of children and families. These are known as selective prevention programs and include the use of social skills training for children, behavioral family therapy, and role playing with special coaching by trainers (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1995).

There are multiple applications of Aggression Replacement Training® with families. The first model is in the Collaborative Intensive Treatment Program, a Court Diversion Program, operated by Perseus House, Inc., in Erie, Pennsylvania. The program offers residential placement, deferment, and early reintegration from placement for community based, adjudicated youth. Specific module training occurs with the Skillstreaming component. Youth participate in comprehensive Aggression Replacement Training® on weekends. Parents are required to attend a two-hour family support and education session. Facilitators conduct separate Skillstreaming sessions based on the prescribed needs of both child and parent. Once the facilitators have determined proficiency with both sets of groups, they participate in a combined session. It is critical that both the parent and child develop role play scenarios that are germane to their lives. For example, the youth could be working on skill #31, Making a Complaint while the parent group is working on skill #32, Answering a Complaint.

Parents often report in satisfaction surveys, that the knowledge gained through Skillstreaming assists not only with the identified child in the program but also with other siblings that have similar problem areas.

A second model of Family Skills Training incorporates the three modules of Aggression Replacement Training® with other Prepare Curriculum components over a period of twelve weeks at Batshaw Youth and Family Centres located in Montreal, Canada. They have had experience with Family TIES since 1992. The generalization of these skills to the family environment or *system* is critical for optimal transfer. The model employs a multi-family approach so all participants can learn from their own and other group members' experiences. The benefits of role playing are further enhanced when performed several times in different situations, with different family dynamics and different performance feedback.

Transfer of training has been shown to be enhanced by procedures that maximize over learning or response availability....Over learning involves extending learning over more trials than would be necessary merely to produce initial change in the individual's behavior. (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997, p. 208)

During the training, simultaneous and progressive benefits to several families can occur. Topical contentious issues, such as curfew negotiations and disagreement about choice of friends, can be processed. Although some families may find it difficult to easily accept intervention with family issues by a youth care professional, they frequently can identify and take advice from other families who may be neutral. Many parents and families feel empowered in a group and, therefore, much more open to work on needed problem resolution.

Lasting change is only facilitated when helping professionals interested in the troubled young person are involved with the total family system.

In Family TIES, the families present typical hassles, trust issues, anger provoking behaviors, and other inhibitors to positive family functioning. The facilitators then prescribe and have families practice Anger Control Training coupled with communication skills from Skillstreaming. The skills of: skill #1, Listening, skill #16, Expressing Your Feelings, skill #17, Understanding the Feelings of Others, skill #25, Negotiating, and other relevant skills are practiced. Moral Reasoning Training themes are used in an attempt to challenge individual and family values in a subtle manner. The teaching of prosocial competencies, using some techniques from Empathy Training, Problem Solving, and Situational Perception Training round the training into a holistic approach to improved family functioning.

During Family TIES sessions the ecological framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner meets the understanding of Virginia Satir who views communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings. She explains that “Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest factor determining what kinds of relationships she or he makes with others and what happens to each in the world” (Satir, 1988, p. 51).

In an attempt to work with the realities of families in an ecological framework, Family TIES emphasizes the critical nature of developing positive intra-family relationships through the teaching of effective communication. It is with the understanding that positive relationships are among the strongest influences on the resiliency of troubled families that we advocate for family skills programming such as briefly described in this article. As Ann Masten points out in her study of resilience and development, "Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities" (Masten, 2001, p. 235).

Summary

In an effort to strengthen family resiliency, as we improve parent-child relationships, we increase the opportunity for such resiliency. Through the infusion of Aggression Replacement Training® with families and their children through programs like the Perseus House, Inc.'s Collaborative Intensive Community Treatment Program and Batshaw Youth and Family Centres' Family TIES program, we increase competency development and problem solving and therefore create more resilient families.

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