

Triggers and Regulation:

Qualitative Experiences of Anger and Aggression Among Youth¹

About the Study

This study aimed to understand adolescents' experiences of anger and aggression. Youth who struggle with anger and aggression may face involvement in the juvenile justice system². 27 youth (13 males and 14 females; ages 11 - to 17) completed surveys and qualitative interviews. 11 youth reported 4 or more ACES on the standard 10-item ACES checklist and were categorized as high exposure. 10 of the youth in the high exposure group endorsed prior system involvement (child welfare or juvenile justice). In this mixed methods study, youth were asked to complete the 10-item Adverse Childhood Experiences Checklist (ACEs) to assess risk associated with trauma. Youth completed semi-structured interviews on their experiences and how they define anger, aggression, triggers, and emotion regulation.



Examples of Triggers

Youth discussed the following triggers during qualitative interviews:

- video games
- school
- a lack of control
- intrusive thoughts
- feeling irritated
- interactions, including with parents, siblings, or intentional acts of being hurt
- being put down or feeling too much pressure



Interpersonal Triggers

Youth also stated that their anger was triggered through other interpersonal interactions, including others lying to them, not listening to them, or not following through on commitments.



Examples of Ways Youth Regulate Their Anger

- talking with someone
- working to decrease angry thoughts
- naming the emotion
- deep breathing
- getting distance from the problem or people
- engaging in physical activities (e.g., sports or grounding techniques)



Results

- 16 youth reporting less than 4 ACES (low exposure) spoke about video games, school, a lack of control, intrusive thoughts, or interpersonal interactions as triggers to anger.
- In contrast, 11 youth reporting 4+ ACES (high exposure) spoke about being hit, feeling oppressed, being put down, and having too much pressure placed on them as triggers to anger.

Why This Is Important

- Youths' symptoms, including the expression of anger and aggression, are often misunderstood and given an array of clinical diagnoses, rather than seen as attempts to minimize threats and regulate emotional distress.
- Research distinguishing anger from aggression with samples of adolescents is scarce though, they are among the most clinically pervasive symptoms for people with complex trauma histories.

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Takeaway

These results point to how anger and aggression as symptoms can be impacted by triggers, especially interpersonal triggers.