"Fair Fighting" – Possibilities of Anger Management

Dörthe Gerber
School at the Heckscher-Klinik in Munich, GERMANY

Conflicts and aggressive behaviour will be repeatedly encountered, particularly in (sports) lessons. Children and adolescents are frequently undergoing an internal struggle to come to terms with their emotions and medical condition during their stay in the clinic, particularly within the area of child and adolescent psychiatry, and can therefore benefit from relief provided by "Fair fighting".

This has prompted the development of a programme which can be utilised for both anger management and the prevention of aggression: "Fair fighting in six stages".

1. Theoretical foundations for anger management

Possible causes of conflict can include boredom, uncontrolled media influences and also social-cultural differences. Aggression, conflicts and violence are on the increase in all types of schools. Within this context, schools and school sports can undertake an educational role, particularly as aggressive behaviour can escalate within this area. It is however also possible to target the de-escalation of aggression actively to nip these tendencies in the bud. Preventative measures include games of cooperation, action tasks on a head-to-head basis and specifically tailored ball games.

Playful fighting, i.e. "fair fighting", is a completely different matter from the violent and aggressive confrontational behaviour experienced or observed by children and adolescents beyond the confines of school. The education of children and adolescents to achieve the non-confrontational and responsible conduct towards one other frequently presents us with a difficult task.

The regulated approach towards and practice of "fair fighting" is intended to encourage children to enjoy physical movement, increase social competence and reduce aggression within a controlled environment. A wide spectrum of experiences in physical activity and confrontation are experienced in a playful manner with the aid of games involving physical contact and forms of combat. Fair fighting can compensate for aggression and channel this energy.

Three important elements of overcoming aggression will be dealt with in greater detail below:

Reduction of aggression
Pent-up energy can be channelled and directed into movement to reduce feelings of rage. Games on soft gym mats are particularly suitable for the controlled alleviation of negative emotions. Safety precautions and relevant educational preparation and post-processing are vital elements in the structure and sequence of the programme.

Channelling aggression
Children and adolescents of all ages are keen to measure their own strength with others: this is a part of their basic needs and is important for their psychological development. The controlled provision of space for these needs through games with a head-to-head structure has proved successful. "Fair fighting" must however always be approached and performed in strict adherence to rules and in gradual small steps, thereby permitting the communication of values such as fairness in head-to-head confrontation and respect and responsibility for others.

Encouragement of cooperation

Here games are appropriate which require cooperation between participating pupils to solve a specific task. The aim is to 'provoke' cooperative behaviour through the setting of the task. Children and adolescents are better able to learn to understand 'working together' through the acute necessity of communication.

2. Vital preliminary considerations

In principle, 'competitive games' and forms of combat normally have the result of encouraging rather than reducing conflict. Classes and learning groups also display a variety of social structures. Teachers must keep the social cohesion of the class/learning group in mind right from the preparation stage and harmonise content and organisational forms accordingly.

Rules should be established in cooperation with the children and adolescents to ensure that they consider these rules to be valid for themselves. It is equally important that procedures for non-compliance to the rules are clearly established.

3. The programme: "Fair fighting in six steps"

This programme has been structured in small steps to enable children and adolescents to acquire familiarity with the topic gradually and thereby develop social competence.

Here are the relevant six steps:

1. Development of pleasure in movement
A pleasurable approach to movement is the target of this initial step.

2. Making and accepting physical contact
Games involving physical contact include games of skill and catching games in which children and adolescents undertake their first physical contacts with others. Cooperation is required in this step: no competitive elements are involved at this stage.

3. Approaching fair fighting
Simple pulling and pushing games in which children and adolescents are initially able to test their strength and learn to "dose" this strength and utilise it skillfully.

4. Practising fair fighting
This stage involves initial experimentation with dosing the volume of individual strength utilised and entails initial experiences of winning and losing within a 'protected environment'.

4.1 Fair fighting in a standing position
As a preliminary step, fair fighting is practised in a standing position. The competitive character is not yet present as the objective of the fight is to bring the opponent to the floor.

4.2 Fair fighting for objects
Fights with objects are seen as a transitional phase prior to the direct conflict with a partner.

5. Fair fighting
The central content of the training series is the actual fight itself.

5.1 Greeting formula
Respect and esteem are of key significance and are experienced through the communal learning of greetings and saying goodbye.

5.2 Learning to fall
Learning to fall prevents injury.

5.3 The fight
Here the focus is on physical conflict with a partner according to a set of rules.

6. Concluding games
Concluding games provide the opportunity to reduce tension. A final relaxation phase permits the children and adolescents to calm down.

4. The workshop "Fair fighting – possibilities of anger management"
Thursday, 04.11.2010

A documentary film was made within the context of the project "Fair fighting" with the participation of children from years 1 – 4 attending school during their stay at the child and adolescent psychiatric unit at the Heckscher clinic in Munich between May to June 2010. The project's objective was to create basic skills for the development of social competence in (sports) lessons. This film which was produced in cooperation with my colleague Annette Göbel and the media consultant Klaus Hagenberger provided the introduction to the topic of our workshop.

Individual exercises from the above-mentioned areas were performed during the workshop to acquaint the international participants with the six-step programme. We found the active participation and immediate *willingness to engage* with the topic on the part of the workshop visitors a positive experience. An actual fight was not performed, but this was shown as a demonstration in detail in the above-mentioned film.

We received extremely positive feedback; the structure of the programme with its small steps and practical application was received enthusiastically and with great interest by participants of the workshop "Fair fighting – possibilities of anger management" who all declared an interest in trying out and establishing this programme in their own schools.