

Peace Literacy Curriculum: Fires Beneath Aggression

adapted for Pre-K classes

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Introduction:

This lesson is based on the Peace Literacy insight that aggression is a response to distress. If you aren't familiar with this way of thinking about aggression, please have a quick look at the lessons on aggression that we've designed for high school and adult learners available for free download at peaceliteracy.org. One of the features of aggression that we do not discuss here but that we think is important is the notion that often aggression can be used to warn others away in order to *deter* violence (i.e., posturing). In other words, while all aggression is caused by distress, not all aggression is designed to hurt people. A book that helps kids ages 5-8 understand posturing is *The Butter Battle Book* by Dr. Seuss. In these lessons though we focus on aggression that is meant to hurt people, including ourselves, as well as animals, and objects.

This is a set of two lessons. The **first** lesson explores the concept of aggression as being fed by the fires of distress such as painful emotions, and the **second** lesson explores ways to de-escalate and calm the fires beneath aggression. The lessons are designed as an introduction to the concepts and provide a framework that you can use throughout the year as you guide children to work through conflicts and help them to orient themselves to what can sometimes be overwhelming feelings of aggression and anger that can arise in conflict situations. At the end of the lesson are some suggestions for your classroom to support this process.

Enduring Understandings:

1. When we get angry and behave aggressively, we can hurt other people, we can hurt ourselves, we can hurt animals, and we can damage objects like toys or furniture.
2. Anger and aggression (these are synonyms) are like the heat caused by a fire.
3. The heat of our anger and aggression is caused by the fires of distress, such as intense and painful emotional discomfort or physical discomfort such as hunger or sleepiness.
4. It is important to understand the fires of distress that make us want to behave aggressively, so that we can help ourselves find other ways to respond to the distress rather than behaving with aggression and anger.
5. When we feel the fires of distress, such as strong, painful emotions, we can learn to respond without the heat of anger and aggression.

Skills:

- Recognizing and naming aggression
- Identifying the distress/fires beneath aggression
- Learning strategies such as deep breathing, removing yourself from the situation, and/or using communication, art, or physical activity to respond to fires of distress without using aggression.

Materials:

- Book: *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry*, Molly Bang, 1999 (there are many YouTube videos of people reading this book.)
- Paper, folded in half like a greeting card.
- Colored pencils, markers, etc.

Lesson 1: Introducing the Fires Beneath Aggression

Introduce the key word for the story: “Aggression”

- Have the word written on a sentence strip, or on a white board, etc.
- Introduce the word to students and share with students that the story is going to help us learn what this word means.
- You may want to clap out syllables with students after you introduce the word, as it is multisyllabic and may be difficult for students to encode the sounds in the entire word without some repetition or support.

Introduce book title & author: “When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry” by Molly Bang

- Read the story of Sophia (or watch a video of the book being read) pausing to ask guiding questions as described below (there are no page numbers in the book; pause-points are marked by text.)
- Pause at “Oh is Sophie ever angry now!”
 - When Sophia is angry that is another way to say that she is behaving aggressively.
 - She is in distress! The distress is like a fire.
 - We call this distress the fires beneath aggression.
 - What kinds of fires or distress are causing Sophie to feel angry and aggressive?
Note that she might feel the distress of frustration, disrespect (her sister grabs the gorilla without asking or saying anything), and injustice (her mom takes her sister’s side), as well as physical distress from tripping, and embarrassment at falling.
 - Have you ever had a distressing situation that made you feel angry and aggressive?
Give students time to reflect and then share. Note any commonality of experiences.
- Continue story. Pause at “Sophie is a volcano about to explode.”

- Why do you think the author described Sophie as a “volcano about to explode?”
Explain that anger can be caused by an intense fire of distress that causes heat like a volcano.
- What happened when she roared? *Highlight the flames.*
- Did flames really come out of her mouth? Did she really turn into a volcano?
Explain how Sophie is feeling the fires of distress that cause the heat of aggression She feels so hot she is going to explode like a volcano.
- *Explain that anger and aggression are very strong feelings that are sometimes hard to control; like heat that feels hot and powerful. (You can even note that sometimes people turn red or even blotchy when they are really, really angry!)*
- What did Sophie feel like doing? *(Kicking, screaming, smashing the world to smithereens).*
- What do you think she is going to do next?
- Continue story. Pause at “Then, for a little while, she cries.”
 - Why does Sophie cry?
 - Is she sad or angry?
 - *Guide students to understand that sometimes we can be angry **because** we are sad. Being angry or aggressive can be caused by the distress of feeling sad (the fire beneath the aggression).*
- Continue story. Pause at “She comes to the old beach tree.”
 - Why does Sophie climb the tree?
 - Do you think that will make her feel better? Why?
- Read through until end.

Discussion questions:

- Does Sophie feel better at the end?
- Did she get her toy Gorilla back?
- Why does she feel better if she did not get the toy she wanted?
 - *Explain that we can feel less aggressive if we can calm some of the fires of distress; even if we don’t always get the toys we want, we can feel less embarrassed about falling, and more understanding of our sibling’s needs; we can learn to cultivate calm within ourselves.*
- Does Sophie still want to kick and scream and smash the world to smithereens?
 - *Note that when we are angry and aggressive, we are in distress, it can make us feel like doing things we wouldn’t do if we were feeling happy and comfortable.*
- What are some things children do when they feel the fires of distress and get angry and aggressive?

- *When people feel the fires of distress like sadness, they can sometimes want to hurt others around them. Note also that once someone is hurt, they can't be unhurt. They can heal, but that takes time. If you break something in anger, you may or may not be able to fix it. If you hurt someone, you can't unhurt them until they heal.*
- This is why we want to learn to respond to the fires or strong feelings of distress in ways that don't hurt anyone.
- What can we do when our distress makes us want to act out with the heat of anger or aggression, like a volcano about to explode?

Activity:

- We are going to make a mini book about anger and aggression.
 - *Take the piece of paper folded in half like a greeting card. Use the front page and the inside pages. There will be no picture on the back page.*
- On the front page, draw a picture of a time when you felt the fires of distress that caused you to feel really, really angry and aggressive. Then, on the inside pages draw a picture of something that might calm the fires of distress and make you feel better. We will keep your pictures and use them for our next lesson.

Lesson 2: Finding Our Way Home

In this lesson you will make a map of Sophie's journey. Students will share ideas for calming the fires beneath aggression and make their own story maps in response. (You will be drawing a model first. Stick figures are fine!)

Materials:

- Big sheet of craft paper or chart paper
- Markers/sharpiers
- Paper for students (11x17 if possible)
- Markers, crayons, drawing materials

Recap story:

- Have students recall Sophie's story. Walk through images of the story with them.
 - *Explain that you will make a map of Sophie's journey, as if we were turning the events of the story into a map we could use to walk through the events. Add the words if you would like.*
- Where does the story start?

- *Draw Sophie's home at the left side of page. Allow students to explain what initiates the story. (Fight over toy Gorilla.)*
- What happens when Sophie's sister grabs Gorilla and Sophie falls over the truck?
 - *Draw Sophie near the house, getting angry and aggressive with balled fists, leaving a space after the image. As children describe the big red roar, draw flames or a big red roar. As children describe the volcano, draw a volcano, leaving space between each image as if each image is a stop along her journey.*
- What does Sophie do when she gets really angry?
 - *Draw Sophie running.*
- What does she do in the woods?
 - *Draw Sophie crying.*
- What does she do next?
 - *Draw Sophie climbing the old beach tree. Add waves, sun, birds, etc. Highlight that here is where she starts to get calm.*
- And when she feels better, what does she do?
 - *Draw Sophie's house again at right side of page.*

Explain:

- These maps can be like the maps that helped sailors stay safe at sea, and not get caught on the rocks or in other dangers.
- We can use these maps to show people how not to get stuck in the heat of aggression, just like Sophie was able to escape the heat of her aggression.
- We can make a path that goes around the big red roar, stays away from the volcano, keeps going right past the crying time, until it gets to the big old tree, where Sophie can get calm.
- You can have many paths to avoid the heat of aggression, just the way we saw in your drawings, there are many different ways you each used to calm yourselves when you felt the fires of distress.

Guiding questions:

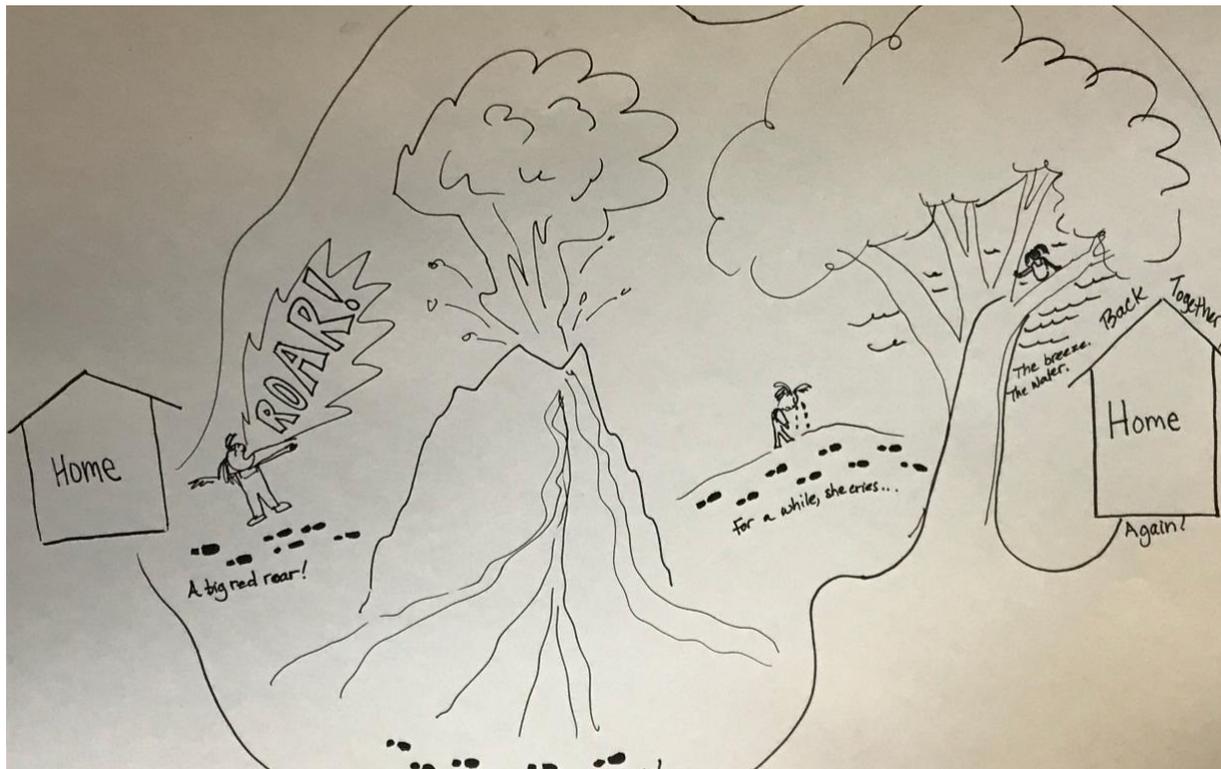
- What are some other ways to cultivate calm when you are feeling the fires of distress so that you don't behave with anger or aggression and hurt anyone or break something? *List student responses and read back when done.*
- Explain that the fires beneath anger and aggression are not necessarily bad. These fires can tell us that something is not right, not comfortable, or not fair, and that it needs our attention.
- There are healthy ways to express the fires beneath aggression. What are some healthy ways to express the fires beneath aggression? *Talking it out, telling an adult, getting a hug, physical activity, art, music, stories, etc.*

Activity:

Explain to students that they are going to make their own story map, only now they can add in some other pictures (perhaps the pictures they drew in the first activity).

- You can start by drawing the house on the left side of the page.
- Now draw Sophie, the red roar, the volcano and the tree, but add some of your own ideas here, around the tree. For example, I will add getting a hug, and draw a picture of someone getting a hug next to the tree.
- You can write words around your picture as well, but be sure to add a path that shows people how to get from the fires of distress to the calm and comfortable place again.

Below is a sample of a story map. It includes the main events, some key words and phrases, and 'paths' around the different events that describe getting back home as a metaphor for calming the fires beneath the aggression.



Below are some examples of a map done with a Kindergarten student.

The image below left shows the beginning of the map, as we did the map in two parts. This is from the first session. You can see the house at the left, and then he drew Sophie as a T-Rex, since they are animals he felt might roar very loudly. He made it a game not to get stuck in the lava or swallowed by the T-Rex.



A close-up of the T-Rex and volcano (above, right) shows the writing.

Supporting students in their journey to find calm in the classroom:

- Post the story map you made with the students in your class.
- Refer to this map in conflict situations (if possible) or after conflicts to reflect on how the situation unfolded.
- Have a “Distress Box” decorated with flames that children can take and use to help themselves as a strategy for de-escalating their fires of distress. It can contain paper and glue for collage, playdough, a stuffed animal, puppets, a digital voice recorder (or something to make a recording or video. This recording should **not** be shared with other students, teachers, or parents. It is simply a way to allow students to express personal feelings in a private way.)
- Make a “Peace Table” or a stop where students can sit together to talk and work out conflicts.
- You will need to support this process for at least the first part of the year.

Other books to explore aggression with pre-K children include *The Barnyard Buddies STOP for Peace*, by Julie Peshorn (2017) and *Moody Cow Meditates*, by K Lee MacLean (2009)

Please Share Your Experience!

If you used *Peace Literacy Curriculum: The Fires Beneath Aggression* in your class, **please send a quick email** to our curriculum coordinator, Sharyn.clough@oregonstate.edu, and let us know:

- * the name of your school or school district
- * how many students were in your class
- * what parts worked best
- * any suggestions you have for improvement

Thank you! 😊