Anger in children

by Richard Niolon PhD

Why do Children get angry?

Many things can make children angry, just as they do with adults, but parents often find dealing with angry children to be the most difficult part of the parenting job. They feel everything from exhaustion to nerve-wracking aggravation. Often parents and children get locked into a contest of wills, and the parent wins with a “Because I Said So” argument. Afterward, they doubt themselves as parents and feel guilty, ashamed, and inept. Many of us were taught as children that we were not “allowed” to be angry, and that anger with parents or caretakers showed great disrespect and selfishness. These kinds of childhood beliefs make it more difficult for us to handle anger in children. Add to this that each generation of children in America seems to grow more open with expression of emotions, even ones labeled as “selfish” emotions, and more open about expressing them in more places (e.g., support groups, friends, social networking sites…). Thus, parents may find their children and teens are more open with the very emotions the parent is least comfortable talking about.

The first step toward better management of children’s anger is to set aside what we were taught, and instead teach something new. Teach children that anger is normal, that it is acceptable and normal to get angry. The task then becomes how to manage anger and channel it toward productive or at least acceptable outlets, and not how to deny or repress it. Setbacks and obstacles can make us stronger if they challenge us to grow.

Parents and teachers must remember that just as there are many things in our adult lives that make us angry (i.e., being cut off in traffic, losing something important, or being frustrated by our computers). Becoming angry at these types of events is normal. Likewise, there are many things in children’s lives that make them angry, and their reactions are normal. Adults must allow children to feel all of their feelings, and model acceptable ways to manage, label, and communicate them. There are differences between being annoyed, mad, angry, outrage… and while these differences make little sense to children, as we grow older we can distinguish between these different emotions. We sometimes mislabel them, of course, and assume annoyance is really outrage, but it is not.

Children respond with anger because they feel helpless. To understand why one child becomes more angry than other children takes some time and effort. What triggered the outburst? The thing to realize is that our anger is generally a reaction to frustration. In children, however, anger appears to be a more generic emotion. It can be triggered by embarrassment, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and hurt. Children often respond with anger to these types of situations because they feel helpless to
understand the situation fully, and helpless to change it. In a way, their anger is a response to frustration as well.

A child who is especially defiant may be behaving this way to counteract dependency and fears of loss. A child who feels hurt by a loss may become angry as a way to avoid feeling sad and powerless. While anger is not the best emotion to feel in all cases, it might be easier to feel than some of these other, more painful emotions.

Sometimes a child’s anger prompts an adult to set rules more clearly, explain matters more thoroughly, or make changes in the child’s environment. In other words, a child may have learned that anger is an all-purpose red flag to let others know that something is very wrong. In these cases, it’s not that the child really feels anger (or feels only anger), but rather that they know anger will provoke a change in the environment that may be a change for the better.

It is important to remember that anger is not the same thing as aggression. Anger is a feeling, while aggression is a behavior. Anger is a temporary emotional state caused by frustration; aggression is often an attempt to hurt a person or to destroy property. Explain that anger is OK, aggression is not. Teach other ways to vent frustration without acting in hurtful or damaging ways.

Dealing with a child’s anger requires first finding out what they feel. Ask them what’s happened, what went wrong, or why they are feeling what they feel. They may be able to tell you very clearly. On the other hand, they may need your help to label their feelings. A parent might respond to a child who hits his brother by asking why he hit him. Go beyond the “he did this first” argument and ask where they learned to hit to tell other people to stop doing something. Maybe other kids at school hit, and the child is learning to do the same. Maybe they learn it from you if you spank or punish in anger. Explain that anger is OK (i.e., “I know how you feel; it makes me mad when other people borrow my things and don’t ask too”). However, explain that aggression (hitting your brother) is not ok. Offer other ways to express anger. A parent might say something like, “Here’s what I do when I get mad.”

Don’t just tell your child what not to do; tell them what they should do too. “Don’t hit your brother when you’re mad. Tell me about what happened, or tell him to give your toys back, or warn him you’ll tell me.” Some parents want to punish anger because they don’t like aggression. Contrary to some popular opinions, punishment is not the most effective way to communicate to children what we expect of them. Explaining, modeling, and setting rules is far more effective. Expect that your child will break a rule three or four times. This is how they learn which rules are serious ones, which ones you will enforce, and which ones can be broken under certain circumstances. Breaking rules often isn’t done in anger, but is a way of learning for children, of testing out the world around them.
Eight Tips for Angry Children

Some of the following suggestions for dealing with the angry child were taken from The Aggressive Child by Fritz Redl and David Wineman. They should be considered helpful ideas and not be seen as a “bag of tricks.”

- Comment on your child’s behavior when it is good.
  - Something like, “I like the way you handled your brother when he took your stuff.” An observant and involved parent can find dozens of things they like about their child’s behavior...“I like the way you come in for dinner without being reminded”; “I appreciate your hanging your clothes even though you were in a hurry to get out to play”; “You were really patient while I was on the phone”; “I’m glad you shared your snack with your sister”; “I like the way you’re able to think of others”; and “Thank you for telling the truth about what really happened.”
  - Teachers can do the same, offering, “I know it was difficult for you to wait your turn, and I’m pleased that you could do it”; “Thanks for sitting in your seat quietly”; “You were thoughtful in offering to help Johnny with his spelling”; “You worked hard on that project, and I admire your effort.”

- Ignore inappropriate behavior that you can tolerate.
  - Nagging you while you’re on the phone can be dealt with by praising what you liked (“Thank you for waiting while I was talking on the phone. I’m off the phone now, so what’s up?”) and ignoring what you don’t like (ignoring a child’s requests while you are on the phone).
  - You may be thinking, “You don’t know what they do then. Then they yell louder and you have to answer them just to have some quiet.” When you respond this way, you reinforce them for yelling. Yelling gets your attention, so next time they will yell louder to make sure you respond. They aren’t trying to annoy you, only using what they have found to be an effective way to get attention.

- Say “NO” clearly and firmly as needed. Limits should be explained clearly and enforced consistently. Of course, you won’t say “no” all the time; when you decide to bend the rules and say yes, explain why that moment is appropriate. Knowing when it is acceptable to break the rules is just as important an knowing when it is not.

- Provide physical outlets and exercise, both at home and at school.
  - We may kick a trash can, cut wood, clean, play a sport, work out at the gym... or do something that lets use force and spend our energy. Kids need physical activity to let off steam too. Keep in mind that you can allow this without risking your safety or the child’s. Let them stomp and kick a trash can in their room, but not in the living room.
  - Also keep in mind that hugs can often make strong emotions less difficult for a child. You don’t hug to make the anger go away though; hug to let the child know you understand their anger and that you take it seriously.
• Take an interest in your child’s activities.
  - Attention and pride can often make negative emotions easier to deal with. Failures and frustrations often mean less when a child knows their parent loves them and is proud of them for others things they do and know. Encourage children to see their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Help them to see that they can reach their goals.
  - Recognize failures and setbacks part and parcel of life. Sometimes children do aggressive or destructive things when frustrated by difficult tasks, like studying. Parents can move in, acknowledge the difficulty of the task and the feelings of frustration or failure it causes, and offer help. It may make the task easier, or it may make the emotions easier to tolerate. Praise the child for their efforts even when it is difficult.

• Use humor. Teasing or kidding can often defuse an angry situation and allow a child to “save face.” Don’t use humor to ridicule your child; use it to make fun of the situation. Something like, “I know you are mad at that little girl for calling you names. Especially such stupid names (giggle). She must not be very smart if the meanest thing she knows how to say is “dumb butt.”

• When situations change, tell the child directly. “I know that noise you’re making doesn’t usually bother me, but today is different because I’ve got a headache, so could you find something else you’d enjoy doing that’s a little quieter?” When your headache is gone, let them know they can go back to what they were doing before.

• Use several parenting methods
  - While spanking likely won’t help, other physical interventions might. Sometimes a child can’t stop once a tantrum has begun, and physically removing the child from the scene or intervening isn’t a type of punishment. It’s a way to help your child stop their behavior long enough to gain some control over it.
  - Use bargaining as needed. We often control our own behavior by doing this. “After a day like this, I deserve a really good meal” may help us curb our own temper when needed. This is not the same as bribery or blackmail. Know what your child likes and what is important enough to your child to serve as a good motivator to manage their anger.
  - Use modeling. Parents and teachers should be aware of the powerful influence of their actions on a child’s or group’s behavior. If you curse when angry, don’t be surprised when a child does. If you count to ten when angry, don’t be surprised if your child follows this good example too.

Learning to manage anger is a skill for the future.
The Role of Discipline

Good discipline includes setting limits, but being flexible when needed. It means explaining the rules and sticking to them in a neutral way. Handling angry children means understanding why they are angry and responding appropriately, setting your own anger aside as much as possible. Bad discipline involves punishment which is unduly harsh and unpredictably meted out. Sarcasm and ridicule also go along with bad discipline.

One of the most important things you do as a parent, teacher, or other adult in a child’s life is help them respect themselves and others so they can be happy in the world. While it takes years of practice, it is a vital process that pays off. Teaching your young child to manage anger and talk about feelings can prevent many angry outbursts in teenage years ahead, in their adult relationships, and in their own relationships with their children.