

“Taming the Anger in Your Child”

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Nine-year-old Janine stands in the check-out line at Walmart with her Mom. Mom has just told Janine that she cannot have the dress that she wants because she misbehaved at school that day. This bright little girl looks into her Mom’s eyes, and proceeds to wet herself, flooding her clothes and the floor with urine. Mom is horrified.

Billy is six. He’s a quiet little boy who has trouble talking about almost anything, except the superhero toys he loves to play with for hours every day. His older sister has a friend over. Billy is playing in the middle of the television area. His sister’s friend says, “Hey, your brother’s cute but he’s really in the way,” and she tries to move him from blocking the TV. Billy becomes out of control with anger, hitting, spitting, screaming and kicking as hard as he can.

What’s going on here?

Today we’re talking about anger. I’m going to start by making a simple statement that I need you to think about carefully. Ready? Almost all anger comes from fear. That’s right, fear.

Example: You’re driving and another car cuts you off in traffic. You swerve to avoid a disastrous accident, but you’re MAD at the crazy, irresponsible driver that put you at risk. What’s the underlying feeling going on here? You felt, very understandably, afraid of what might have happened.

Children who experience early trauma, such as traumatic separation from their birth family, or multiple foster care placements, or abuse, and especially neglect, have experienced great fear throughout their early years when their brain function was developing. We can now actually watch this development on brain scans – it’s incredibly sad to see the negative changes in brain development that happen because of these “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (see www.acestudy.org).

Everything that was dangerous before is now CODED in the brain (which means, really, that it is mixed with or remembered with) the feeling of fear. So, for example, if being hungry for much of their young lives and being ignored and not cared for much of their infancy was their reality, then we know that they spent much of their early life being afraid that they would die. After all, dying is what happens to children who are not fed and not cared for. So, any time they feel hungry, or anytime they feel ignored, they again feel the feeling of fear that was CODED with that experience when they were infants or toddlers.

Take the bigger example of the infancy or toddler fear being caused by people in their family. Now, sadly, FAMILY is the trigger that brings up the early and very intense feelings of fear. It doesn't have to be the SAME family, it just has to be FAMILY. Oh dear, now how can we ask parents to be the place of healing, when it is also the trigger for fear?

But remember, fear is often expressed by anger. ANGER. That's the way that children (and frankly lots of adults) express their fear.

People use anger to cover up their fear.

And partly, people use anger to cover up their fear because they don't like people knowing they're afraid.

And really, children so often express anger, even when it's covering up fear underneath, because of both reasons ... they don't know that they're feeling fear, and they also wouldn't want to show fear because that leaves them feeling vulnerable.

So, what do they do? The same thing we do when we are driving and some numbskull cuts off. We express our fear in anger.

Or think about a time when you were angry at the manager at the store who would not give you the value of the coupon that you brought in, just because you were one day overdue. You might be very angry at the store manager, because underneath it all, you're afraid of the skyrocketing cost of food and you're worried about not being able to buy quality food for your family while you're paying all of your other bills. So, you carry the fear-driven anger back out to your car, and the first time your children start fooling around you "unload" on them. You're really not mad at them. But the fear-driven state brings you to a hypersensitive state, and almost anything will set you off, especially a situation (like with your own children), in which you feel safe to let it out.

So, if you think about it, it's a pretty easy leap from the fact that these children are almost always feeling fear, to understanding why seemingly small, or pretty unimportant little things that happen make a child go into a rage, or express anger, or act just plain mean. They are feeling intense fear, and show it as anger.

What do we do about that? Here's where therapy can be a big help.

A good therapist will do a few things: (1) a good therapist will help a children (yes, even a very young child), learn to identify the difference between basic emotions, and to know when they are feeling each one (happy, sad, scared, mad are the basics); (2) a good therapist will include foster or adoptive parents in therapy, to help make the FAMILY a place of safety, instead of a place that triggers fear; and (3) a good therapy treatment will include teaching and then practicing with the child ways of identifying how they feel and then expressing it in ways other than anger.

At home, you need to keep you cool (not always easy, I know). As much as you can, remember that the anger is not really, truly targeted at you. It's often "left-over" anger from early experiences, or it could

be from other conditions with which your child is functioning. For example, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is one that shows itself with so many children in foster care, and can be a common cause for children showing anger, or even rage, with no identifiable cause.

What you can try is to find the ways to help the child calm down, which is partly why you need to go to therapy with your child. With a good therapist you can learn how the therapist is teaching your child to deal with the intense feelings. And, you need to understand that deep down inside, your child is experiencing fear that is not his or her fault, but is a deep, strong, and very powerful force that was “taught” to them, and which we, as parents and clinicians and adults, have to help them to tame.

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