

Getting Along: When I'm Angry



Anger is a feeling that all children experience. An infant's hungry cry, a toddler's temper tantrum, a preschooler's angry push, a school-ager's hurtful taunt, or a teenager's hostility are all vivid reminders that anger is no stranger to childhood.

Anger is part of life. Sometimes life hurts. Sometimes life is not fair. All children will experience anger in one way or another. And all children will learn how to cope with their anger—sometimes in a way that is “helpful” and sometimes in a way that is “hurtful.”

Why is it important to teach children about anger?

Anger is an inevitable part of life, but some ways are better than others for dealing with it.

We live in a violent world. Some children live in violent families or communities, others see violence graphically depicted on TV. It may be hard to believe, but the average child in the U.S. witnesses 45 acts of violence on TV each day.

Added to TV violence are talk shows and music videos that promote and glamorize drug and

alcohol abuse. Pictures and lyrics of many musical groups present suicide as an “alternative” or “solution.”

All of these influences can have a powerful effect on how children relate to their world and solve problems. In today's world, learning to cope with anger and frustration in a positive way may be one of the most important tools your child learns.

What we hope children learn:

- To express anger nonviolently: It is OK to feel angry, but it is not OK to hurt someone because we are angry.
- To recognize angry feelings in themselves and others.
- To learn how to control angry impulses.
- To learn self-calming techniques.
- To communicate angry feelings in a positive way.
- To learn how to problem solve.
- To learn how to remove themselves from a violent or angry situation.
- To learn how to avoid being a victim of someone else's angry actions.

Taking charge of angry feelings

Learning how to “take charge” of angry feelings is an important lifelong skill. Caring adults can help children learn how to handle anger in ways that are effective and helpful.

“Taking charge” of angry feelings means developing a “bag of tricks” or coping skills that can be used for different situations.

Different things work for different children. Parents can help children cope with anger by teaching them to

- relax,
- communicate,
- problem solve,
- change their environment, and
- look for humor.

Learn to relax

Anger causes a very physical response from most children. Muscles tense, hearts pound, and stomachs ache. Children can be taught to recognize these physical reactions and learn how to relax. One of the best ways to cope with a harmful physical response to anger is to do something else physical.

Help children calm their anger by using the five senses: touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, and seeing.

Squeezing play dough, splashing water, running outside, listening to music, painting a picture, tensing and relaxing muscles, taking slow deep breaths, or eating a healthy snack all make good responses to angry feelings.

Children who respond well to touch can be taught how to massage their own neck or arms as a self-calming technique. These same children also may find a great deal of comfort in stroking or caring for a pet.

You might say

- “Maybe it would help to draw a picture about how you feel.”
- “A warm bath sometimes helps to wash away angry feelings.”
- “When you feel hungry and irritable, tell me you need a snack.”
- “Sit down and take slow, deep breaths until you think you have calmed down.”

Learn to communicate

Children can be taught to communicate their feelings in a variety of ways. For some children this may mean talking things over with a friend or caring adult. A stuffed animal or family pet also can be a good listener.

Children can often explode in anger, yet not be able to tell you what their anger is all about. This may be because their abilities to reason and think logically are not yet well developed.

Teach children to identify their angry feelings by using the following statement:

I feel _____ when _____ because _____.

For example, “I feel angry when Martha calls me names because it embarrasses me.”

The idea here is to help children realize that there are always hidden feelings and actions beneath angry emotions. In the example above, being embarrassed and humiliated prompted angry feelings.

Learning to recognize the hidden emotions behind anger is an important first step in learning how to resolve anger.

Some children also may find it difficult to use words to get what they need. Learning to say please and thank you are big steps

for some children. Other children have even greater difficulty asking for help or asking other children to play. Still others must learn how to be assertive when another child “bullies” them.

Adults can help by teaching children the words they need to say and by coaching them as they learn to interact with others.

You might say

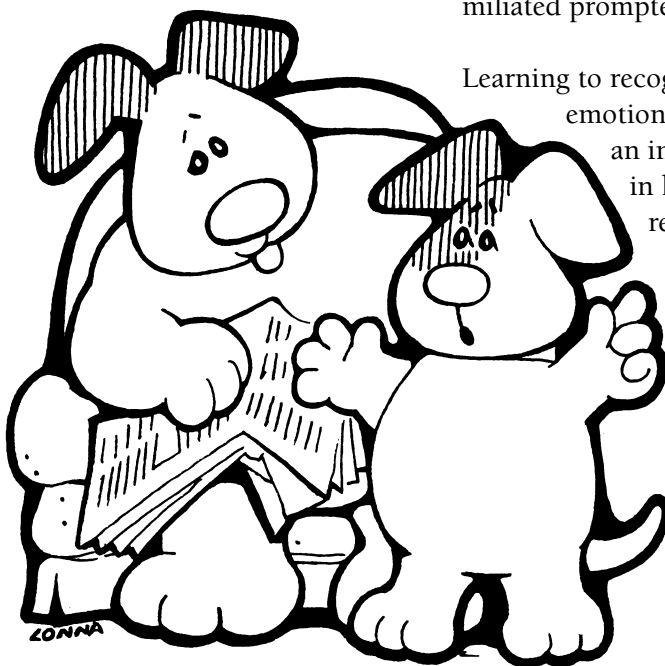
- “Ask if you need help.”
- “Say to Sara, ‘May I please play with you?’”
- “Tell Martha, ‘I won’t play with you if you call me names.’”
- “Say to Jon, ‘I am playing with the puzzle now; you may have it after lunch.’”
- “Tell someone how you feel before you lose control.”

Learn to solve problems

Older preschool and school-age children can be taught to problem solve as a “prevention” tool for getting angry. Adults can coach children through the problem solving steps: (1) stop the action, especially if someone is about to get hurt, (2) listen to each other, (3) think of different ways to solve the problem, and (4) choose an idea that everyone agrees on.

Children may need some adult assistance to carry out their problem-solving ideas. Also help children to evaluate why their plan did or did not work.

Most young children will need adult help to think through this process. Even though it does take time, doing this process over and over helps young children become fairly good at identifying a problem and coming up with ways to



solve the problem. A child who has lots of practice in thinking of different ways to solve a problem is much more likely to solve a conflict in a positive way.

Problem-solving steps

1. Stop the action.
2. Listen to each other.
3. Think of ways to solve the problem.
4. Choose an idea everyone agrees on.

You might say

1. "Stop. I see two kids getting very angry. Let's see if we can solve this problem."
2. "Let's listen to each other. What seems to be happening here? So Jason and Carey both want to play with the puzzle."
3. "Hmm. What could you do so that you both can play with the puzzle?"
Solution 1: You could set a time and take turns.
Solution 2: Jason could play with it until dinner. Carey could play with it after dinner.
Solution 3: You could play with it together.
Solution 4: We could toss a coin to see who gets to play first.
Solution 5: We could put the puzzle in the closet and no one could play.
Solution 6: We could get out another puzzle.
4. "What sounds like a good solution? OK, let's get out another puzzle. I'll check back in a few minutes to see how you are getting along."

Learn to change your environment

Children can be taught to change their environment. Sometimes in an angry situation it is best to

walk away until everyone can cool off. Encourage children to remove themselves from the situation if their strong feelings are getting out of control. Help them identify special "cooling off" places where they can safely regain control.

Adults also can help to structure the overall environment so that it promotes good behaviors. Clean, orderly rooms and regular routines go a long way in creating a peaceful atmosphere. Chaotic schedules and cluttered environments often leave children feeling confused and frustrated.

You might say

- "When things don't feel right, it is OK to walk away."
- "Take a break. Cool down Jake!"
- "Walk away when you're angry; come back with a smile."
- "When things seem wild and crazy it helps to slow down and do something quiet."
- "It is very upsetting to find broken toys all over the floor. Let's prevent angry feelings by picking things up and putting them where they belong."

Look for humor

Humor is a great antidote for anger. Whenever possible, help children to see the humor in a tense situation. Responding to an angry outburst in a calm way with a gentle smile will often help diffuse the anger. Learning to laugh or joke about your own anger helps children put things in perspective.

You might say

- "I'll bet we will laugh about this later."
- "Yesterday, I was as angry as a wet cat! But today I feel just

pur-r-fect!"

- "Can you see anything funny about this? Maybe we could make up a funny story about this situation."

Teach children what to do

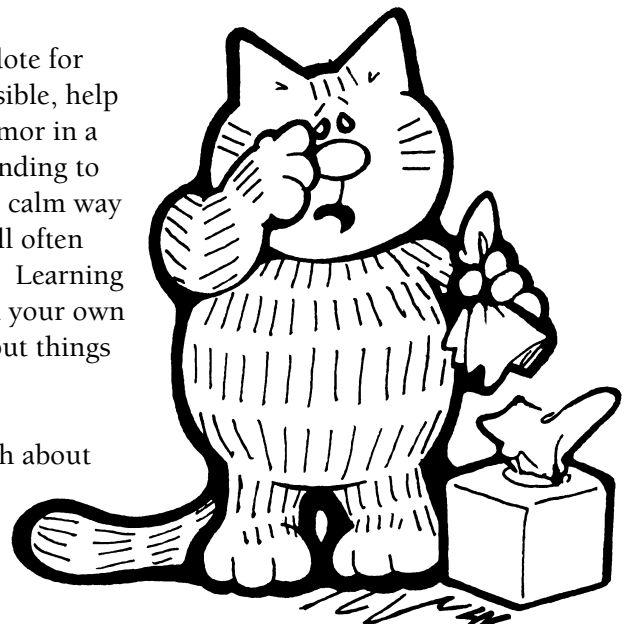
Telling a child not to do something works best when it is followed by something they can do.

YOU MAY NOT:

- Break something
- Scream at someone
- Bite someone
- Be mean to a pet
- Hurt yourself
- Throw a temper tantrum
- Hit somebody

BUT YOU MAY:

- Hug a stuffed animal
- Have a good cry
- Draw a picture
- Talk things over
- Rip up old newspapers
- Walk away from the situation
- Play with clay or water
- Bounce a ball
- Take deep, slow breaths
- Ask for help
- Listen to music



- Go someplace quiet to cool down

Parents get angry too!

Of course, parents get angry. And remember it's OK to get angry; just be sure that your anger doesn't take over. Use the opportunity to show your children positive ways to deal with anger. Teaching by example is an important parenting tool.

- Identify your own angry feelings. Children quickly sense when you are angry. Saying, "I'm mad, I'm upset, I'm feeling really angry," teaches children how to talk about their own anger.
- Explain why you are angry. Remember that young children often think that they are somehow the cause of your anger. A statement like "I am really angry that the car won't start," helps children understand what is really behind your anger.
- Deal with anger in a positive way. Saying to children, "I am really angry about that broken vase. I am going to take a few minutes to calm down on the front porch and then we will talk about what happened" sets a good example.

Is it OK to fight in front of the kids?

No family is an oasis of peace and harmony. All families have disagreements and arguments from time to time. Watching parents

argue can sometimes be a little scary for children, but seeing them resolve their differences in positive ways can offer tremendous stability and security.

Children should not be an audience for physical violence or extremely hostile arguments between parents. The impact of witnessing this kind of anger can have far-reaching effects on children.

Chronic anger

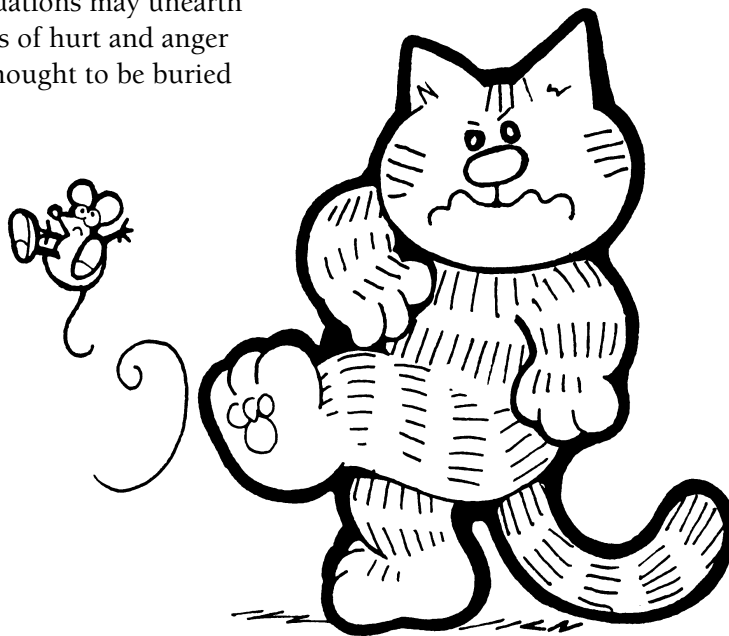
Sometimes anger gets in the way of normal everyday living. When anger is extremely intense or is happening too frequently, it may be time to get help.

A divorce, an abusive experience, a job loss, or a death all can trigger extreme anger. To make matters worse, sometimes these same difficult situations may unearth past feelings of hurt and anger that were thought to be buried long ago.

Ongoing anger feeds on itself and can be extremely destructive for families. If things get too out-of-hand, you may want to consider seeking the guidance and support of a counselor or family therapist.

Family Life 8

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