

Helping Children Manage Anger at Parents

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Even in the best families, children will sometimes be angry at their parents. Getting angry at each other is part of normal family life. However, all children must learn how to manage their anger without hurting others.

Children get angry at their parents for the same reasons that they get mad at their friends. They are frustrated because they can't do what they want or get something they want. They get angry in response to parents' demands. Or they get angry in response to their parents' anger.

Children also get angry at their parents for two special reasons. They may feel afraid of certain events or whatever is going on, and they may use the anger to express or cover up those concerns. Rather than feeling helpless, children often become angry. Children in single-parent families may often worry about parents leaving them or not caring about them, and these concerns may also trigger anger. And when children go through changes or surprises in their lives, they may get angry as a way to get some control. Anger gives them a sense of power over their lives.

Parents can teach children to understand their anger and direct their energy toward solving the problem. Help children learn that anger is a signal that something is wrong. They need to stay calm and try to correct whatever is troubling them.

Feelings Are a Signal

Anger is an important feeling. It gives us a signal that something isn't right. Or that something is unfair. We want children to see and understand when they are feeling tense and uptight, so they can relax and focus on the problem. Help them realize that screaming and fighting will not lead to a solution.

We can help children recognize angry feelings by talking about the signs that signal the anger inside their bodies. Tense muscles or an upset, churning stomach are some of the feelings of anger. Ask them to think of situations that might make them angry. Have them pretend they are actually getting mad so they can understand these early signs of anger.

Staying Calm

The next step is to help children learn how to stay calm when they are feeling angry. Encourage them to remember to stay calm. The anger will only grow when children focus on it and say to themselves, "I'd really like to punch you out," or "I'm going to let you have it." Children can stay calm by saying, "I don't like this, but I'm not going to scream and yell," or "Getting upset won't help." Children can practice these calming statements by thinking about times when they might be angry and then saying some calming words to themselves.

In actual situations where children are feeling very angry, "time-out" can be used to help them calm down. If children scream and yell or become violent, remove them from the situation. Send them to their room and have them spend that time calming down. Encourage children to take their own "time-out." They can excuse themselves from the situation and go away to calm down. Help children learn how to manage anger by making sure that they don't get their way by being aggressive.

Some people think that beating on a pillow or tearing something up will help get the anger out. This just doesn't work. While it may seem better to take it out on some object rather than on a person, the aggressive feelings will probably not go away. Rather than beating up the anger, children need to find ways to use the anger to focus on the problem.

Attention to the Problem

Once children learn how to stay calm in frustrating and conflict situations, they can start focusing on the cause of those feelings. Here again, parents might encourage them to say to themselves, "I should just stay calm and try to understand why this is unfair," or "I'm not going to let this person get to me." Help children talk about what's bothering them and explain their feelings. As parents, we know that we can't always do what our children want, but we can explain to them when we can't do some things.

Sometimes as parents we are clearly wrong, or we haven't thought things through. We must remember that it's okay to change our minds when children can offer good ideas and suggestions for doing something else. Parents should never give in to aggression, but they should give in to good, clear reasoning. When we work with children as they try to solve problems, we teach them that it's okay to be angry as long as they stay calm and focus on solving the problem. Even when there is no way to change the situation, we can praise children for trying to solve the problem without being aggressive.

Our Own Anger

At a very early age, children learn how to make their parents angry. They see how we manage anger, and that becomes a model for how children manage their anger. Using punishment such as spanking

will teach children that it's all right to be aggressive when they are angry. One of the nice things about time-out is that it lets the child calm down, and it lets the parent calm down too. It is important for children to see that when we are angry we are also trying to stay calm and focus on the problem.

This works not only when we are angry at our children, but also at other people. When we are angry at friends, relatives, an ex-spouse, or others, it is important that we manage these feelings. We should practice staying calm and addressing the problems. Not only will this provide a model for children, but it will also help solve the problem.

Love and Security

Remember that anger is sometimes the result of feeling afraid or helpless. When children know that they are loved and cared for, they are less likely to feel that way. Remind them that they are important and that they are worthy of our love and respect. By finding out what children are thinking and feeling and by spending time with them, we show that we care. In the long run, this will reduce their anger, but it may take time.

Children also need to feel safe and secure. This helps them feel that they have some control over what happens in their lives. And it reminds us how important it is for children to have routines in their lives. Bedtime, mealtimes, and school and weekend activities should all happen regularly, which will help put order in their lives. Of course there will always be some changes. And as parents we should help children be prepared for changes. If you are moving or changing jobs, let children know what is going to happen. Even when children don't like the change, you can answer their questions and assure them that there will be a routine again.

By providing children with love and security and helping them understand how to stay calm and solve problems, parents can help children manage their anger very well.

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions when you talk with children about being angry at parents.

1. Kids sometimes are angry with their parents. Have you ever felt angry at your parents? What makes you feel angry at them?
2. Why or why not? What can your parents say or do to help you calm down when you are angry?
3. How can you tell when you're angry? How do you look? How do you feel on the inside?
4. When you are angry, what can you do to calm yourself down?

5. Sometimes it helps to tell others when you are angry and to explain why you are angry. Can you think of something that makes you angry and then tell me how you feel and what you think we can do about it?

Activity

Together with your children, think of some conflicts you have had. They might be when you wouldn't let them go to a favorite friend's house because they had homework or hadn't done their chores. Act out these situations. Encourage children to talk about how it feels to be angry and then practice calming down. Also, try talking about different solutions to the problem.