

# Dealing With the Angry Child

<http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/350/350-021/350-021.html>

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## Introduction

Helping children learn to handle their angry feelings can be a frustrating problem for most parents and teachers. Young children have not yet learned how to express anger in acceptable ways. When they get angry, they are likely to take it out on another person, to blame someone else, scream, hit others, or display some other inappropriate behavior.

Some children grow up ashamed of their feelings because they have been taught that it is "bad" to feel or show anger. It is much more emotionally healthy for children to learn that everyone has angry feelings at times and that there are appropriate ways to express anger.

Parents and teachers can help children learn to cope with their feelings of anger and to express them appropriately by remembering the following tips when dealing with the angry child.

### **Always focus on the behavior**

It is not children that we want to change. Rather, it is the inappropriate behavior that we want to change. We want to support appropriate behavior. Calling attention to inappropriate behavior lets the child know that the actions are not acceptable, but that the child is still loved. Do not forget to also focus on appropriate behavior. Praise and reinforcement let children know which behaviors are appropriate and acceptable.

### **Focus on the behavior.**

Remember, it is not "bad" to be angry, but it is "bad" to express angry feelings in ways that hurt others.

### **Teach the child to consider angry feelings as a problem to be solved.**

Help children use their minds to solve problems and to think about solutions or alternatives to their angry feelings. Help them see that "getting mad" does not solve the problem.

### **Help the child express angry feelings in words.**

Be a role model for children by using words that tell how the child *feels*, not what the child *thinks* about another person. For example, "I am sad when you won't let me play with you;" not "You're mean and I hate you!" Words that hurt others are not acceptable ways of coping with anger.

### **Use "You-messages" to encourage children to express their feelings in words.**

"You-messages" describe the child's feelings and help you and the child focus on the inappropriate behavior. They encourage children to express their troublesome feelings. Many times, when children are allowed to express angry feelings, the feelings tend to disappear. An example of a "you-message" is, "You must be really mad that Sue wouldn't share her new books with you."

### **Allow children to make acceptable choices**

Give children the responsibility for their behavior whenever possible. Allow the child to make acceptable choices by offering only choices you can live with.

### **Teach by example.**

Good role models for children are always the best teachers! If children hear you using words to express your anger, they are likely to do the same. On the other hand, if they hear you scream or see you throw something when you get mad, then they are likely to think those behaviors are acceptable. Likewise, if you hit children when you get mad at them, you are teaching them to use violent behavior to express their angry feelings.

### **Help a child learn to get rid of angry feelings through vigorous physical activity such as:**

running, digging, pounding nails in a board, punching a punching bag, tearing newspaper.

### **Help children forget about angry feelings by interesting them in activities which will take their minds off the feelings.**

Young children forget about angry feelings quickly, especially if something else seems more exciting.

### **Help the child get rid of tense feelings through soothing activities such as:**

playing in the sand and making mud pies, taking a warm bath, playing in a sink full of warm, sudsy water, playing with play dough, or finger painting.

### **Interest the child in an absorbing activity such as making cookies.**

It is always easier to talk to children about their feelings once they have calmed down.

### **Use closeness and touching to calm an angry child.**

Angry, impulsive behavior often goes away when an adult soothes and comforts the child.

### **Express interest in the child's activities.**

A child about to use a toy in a destructive way is sometimes easily stopped by an adult who shows interest-"Show me how the toy works."

### **Tell the child how you feel.**

For example, a parent can say, "That noise you are making doesn't usually bother me, but today I don't feel well, so could you find something else you enjoy doing?"

### **Use physical restraint only when necessary.**

Sometimes children may lose control so completely that they have to be physically restrained to prevent them from hurting themselves or others. Simply hold the child in your arms until he or she quiets down and is able to listen to you.

### **Catch the child being good.**

Be sure to support and reinforce appropriate behavior. Comments such as "You did a good job cleaning your room," "I am glad you remembered to wash your hands," or "I like the way you shared your toys today," help children understand acceptable behavior. Most parents tend to comment on undesirable behavior, but forget to verbally reinforce good behavior. If parents praise good behavior more often, the child will have fewer reasons to be angry.

### **If You Want To Know More**

Kurcinka, M.S. *Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for Parents Whose Child is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent, Energetic*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.

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This publication was adapted from "Dealing with the Angry Child" by Betsy Schenck, Virginia Cooperative Extension, 1982.

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*May 1, 2009*