Understanding Anger
"Anger Energizes Us to Fight When Things are Not Right"

Parents and teachers have a difficult time explaining the nature of anger. Using synonyms such as mad, frustrated, or disappointed to explain anger does not really promote a child's understanding. Here is a simple working definition that proactively addresses anger triggers and helps us manage the strong feelings that cloud our thinking and fuels aggression; Anger is the reaction that energizes us to fight when things are not right. It is our brain and body's reaction to when something gets in our way or when our safety is threatened. Anger can be a rapidly triggered emotion that can occur without any awareness of thought or intention. It can begin with a pre-anger vulnerability where a child is hungry, tired, stressed, etc. but shows little or no overt signs of anger. There are various stages of anger that reflects the degree of physical arousal, cognitive distortion, verbal/physical aggression, and the degree to which the thinking brain has been hijacked by the emotional dysregulation (see anger stages handout).

The biology of anger often involves extremely rapid and powerful chemical processes that accelerate heartbeat and increases blood flow to our muscles. The thalamus, hypothalamus, periaqueductal gray (PAG), temporo-parietal junction and amygdala are all involved in the triggering and manifestation of anger. The limbic system is the first to react and activate the energy systems; only then does the information make its way to the thinking brain-the prefrontal cortex. Prefrontal cortex, "thinking brain" functions also involve left-right brain integration are essential in anger control. The left part of the brain contains the approach functions – moving towards whatever the trigger or stimulus is. The right side of the orbital prefrontal cortex is designed to withdraw or flee. (Only rarely do angry children withdraw from the situation. One of the reasons it is hard for children to leave an angering situation it goes against the natural tendencies of a young, maturing brain.) (An excellent review of the biology of anger is provided in Healing the Angry Brain by Ronald Potter-Efron

The behavioral component is most commonly an energized approach process that involves yelling, threatening, destruction and, sometimes, physical attack. This energizing process can overwhelm young children and is quite difficult for them to control. An understanding of these energizing reactions is extremely critical. Knowing how a child reacts, helps us teach him/her to recognize and manage the early stages of anger before it overwhelms the thinking brain and leads to behavioral and interpersonal problems.

It is important to understand that anger is energizing, approach emotion that typically has an interpersonal element. Anger triggers commonly involve key people in a child's life. The degree of anger involves the child's perception of the "attackers" intention and the child's perceived importance of the want/goal. People who are angry are overly optimistic – they

think they're going to accomplish what they set out to do (example: minimizing risk, taking on someone who is stronger, etc.). They tend to take more risks and focus on action rather than introspection. They have the belief that they can succeed.

A child's ability to manage their anger is hampered by the fact that the "thinking brain" is limited in its ability to assert influence over the anger centers (the "dinosaur" or "hulk" brain"). Anger effectively suppresses the thinking brain. Thus, angry children don't respond to what you say to them. When a child is angry, the limbic system is sending messages to the thinking brain, but the problem is that the thinking brain is not talking back. The brain tends to be overly "optimistic" and "attacks" when other actions would be more effective. As children mature, the pathways develop so that they are better able to use cognitive strategies to control their temper.