

Why Anger Control Strategies Don't Always Work

Anger Control is Extremely Difficult to Achieve

As you can probably gather from the scope of FIRED UP, the topic anger control is extremely complicated and difficult to achieve. While basic reward and consequence systems can be effective, it generally requires a much broader and deeper approach. The Underlying Problem Isn't Understood.

Children who lose their temper will not respond to anger control coaching if they are hungry, sleep deprived, lonely or struggling academically in school. If you do not address issues that might be fueling the anger, anger control techniques won't work. It isn't an Anger Problem. Surface anger can mask other problems. We need to consider whether a child might be depressed or stressed for some reason. Angry Feels Good. Children may enjoy the feeling of control and power that anger provides. We need to give them other ways of feeling powerful and address their need for control.

The Child is Too Young. Toddlers get angry as they struggle to control their body and use language to express their wants. Although they are learning to meet their own needs and become less reliant upon adults, they are incapable of controlling their anger without parent help. While time outs may be helpful, children lack the cognitive ability needed to truly control their anger.

The Anger is Developmentally Appropriate. Temper tantrums are common among 2 and 3-year-old children. Anger outbursts are a normal manifestation of the physical, social, and emotional changes that adolescents endure. Anger control techniques can help, but they cannot eliminate anger problems that these children experience.

Our Expectations are Unreasonable. Children can learn to control their temper, not eliminate their anger. Anger is a natural part of life and there will inevitably be times when a child loses control. This is particularly true for children who are spending so much time at school and in other structured settings that they cannot control their anger according to setting expectations.

Unproductive or Unhealthy Parent Mindsets: Parents naturally have thoughts and feelings in response to a child's anger. Sometimes they reflect on their behavior as a child, thinking that they never would have reacted as their child is now. Often, they attribute as sense of their child's intentionality or control that fuels their own anger. Many times, there are external circumstances (such as "you have to be quiet when the baby is sleeping" or "I have to work, I cannot keep getting calls from school"). If we don't address these issues, we will not accomplish our goals. The Anger is reinforced. If the anger is reinforced, a child will not learn to control their temper. We must look at the events that surround a child's anger and determine whether there are powerful secondary gains. If anger episodes result in too much adult attention or nurturing (once the anger episode is over), the problem will be difficult to overcome.

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The Adults are Part of the Cycle: Often parents and other adults are part of the anger cycle. They are inadvertently fueling the anger through patience efforts that don't work or through threats and consequences that exacerbate the moment. We don't mean to imply that parents are the problem, but they are certainly part of the solution.

The Adult Doesn't "Like" the Child: The behaviors associated with a child's anger are often extremely stressful. It is difficult to enjoy time spent playing with a child who erupts when they lose, or things don't go their way. Starting off the morning with arguments or ending the evening with conflict has a powerful impact on parents and their relationship with their son or daughter. We must do what we can do build positive connections, whether it is watching a show together or going swimming.

Insufficient Motivation. Unfortunately, children are not necessarily motivated to control their temper. Anger feels good and has positive functions that children don't want to lose. They don't understand the negative impact on others and don't accept responsibility for their own behavior. Before children can truly benefit from anger control training, they need to understand why anger is a problem and how they gain from learning to control their temper.

Poor Role Models. How can we expect a child to learn to control their temper if the adults around them continue to have anger control problems?

Too Much Talk, Not Enough Practice. We need to do more than talk about anger control; we need to practice anger control strategies. Reading a book or attending some counseling sessions is simply not enough. We need to practice the strategies on a daily basis.

Not Enough Time. We get impatient when a child continues to have anger outbursts and the strategies don't work immediately. Learning to control our temper takes time, months and even years of work and maturity. This is especially true for parents who are so busy that they do not have the opportunity to proactively work on anger control. We are Reactive, Not Proactive. As with many other aspects of our lives, we only focus on anger control when an anger problem occurs. We need to be more proactive and address the issues that make children susceptible to anger problems. We need to practice anger control strategies, not wait for anger episodes to happen.

There is A Negative Focus. Children associate anger control techniques with being in trouble. We need to give credit to children when they do control their anger and accept that anger is a natural part of our lives that needs to be controlled, not eliminated.

There are a Lack of Resources: The need for behavioral and mental health services is overwhelming and we simply don't have the school and community resources. The FIRED UP platform was created in part to provide strategies that schools and families when no other resources are available or until other supports are found.