

Building Motivation to Learn Anger Control

For most children, the rush of anger ends as abruptly as it begins. When they are over being angry, they expect others to be over it also. They do not understand that the anger episode has a lingering impact. When a child sees that their parents or siblings are reluctant to do things for them or spend time with them, they may be more motivated to work on controlling their anger.

Children don't understand the impact their anger has on other people. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is to have the children be accountable for the "cost" of their anger. Keep track of the time that is wasted by arguing and anger outbursts. This includes time spent by parents, teachers and other adults who must intervene. There are a number of consequences that might help make this point. A child who gets destructive when he or she is angry may have to repair or replace what they damaged. A younger child can do a bit of clean up around the house. A child who wastes time through arguing or causes a parent to be late for work, may owe their mother or father some chores or actually pay them for wages they lost. Sometimes privileges are lost because we cannot trust that our children can control their temper. They are not allowed to watch TV. before dinner (they might get angry when asked to turn it off) or have a friend come over after school. It is often useful to chart or graph the time that is wasted by anger outbursts as a way of visually demonstrating to a youngster the toll that their behavior is taking.

Children have trouble viewing things from another person's perspective. They tend to be quite egocentric and don't readily consider the needs and feelings of others. You can help your child by spending more time talking about the views of others. After watching a TV. show or reading a book, talk about the feelings and motivations of characters in the story. Have your child spend time helping others by donating their time, possessions, or money to a charity. Give your youngster the role of taking care of the family pet. On a holiday or birthday, recruit your son or daughter to help you pick out a gift for a friend or relative. When you are upset by your son or daughter's behavior, establish a connection between your emotional state and your willingness to do things with them or for them. Put off playing a game, reading a story, or giving them a ride until you have time to unwind or settle down yourself. Require your youngster to do something nice for you, as a way of helping you to feel better and showing that they are sorry for upsetting you.

Children with anger control problems don't take responsibility for their behavior. They tend to view feedback about their actions as hostile criticism which only fuels their anger. Children try avoiding responsibility for their anger by blaming other people ("I wouldn't get so angry if you . . ."). They are not motivated to work on controlling their anger because they believe they would not have an anger problem if family and friends treated them differently. With such children, we must be clear that the responsibility for anger control is theirs. They cannot excuse their behavior because of how someone else acted. Others are not responsible for making sure that they do not lose their temper.

Children don't understand the difference between wanting something and deserving it. They don't appreciate the importance of having to work to achieve their goals. Many children today expect rewards and privileges. They see chores, homework and other daily responsibilities as intrusions on their agenda. We can help build a child's motivation to change their behavior and control their anger by establishing a connection between work and reward. Children must learn that they need to "give to get" and that they cannot simply expect things to go their way. If your son or daughter has something that they want you to do for them, think of something that they can do in return. If they need a ride to a friend's house, perhaps they can help clean out the car or do some other simple thing for you. While making them a snack, perhaps they can put on the stereo for you or get you something to drink.

Parents are inconsistent in their response to their child's anger. They miss an opportunity to send a strong statement about the importance of anger control. Busy parents often don't have the time or energy to respond constructively to their child's inappropriate behavior. They do not follow through when their son or daughter hurts other people's feelings or disrupts a family activity. A parent may be unwilling to risk another outburst by trying to hold their child accountable. There may be other important family or personal matters that demand their attention. Sometimes, parents simply forget to follow through. One way to be more consistent is to keep a small notebook handy to record problems that occur. They serve as a reminder to parents and teachers that the episode needs to be discussed and that perhaps some consequences or amends are in order.

Children do not understand the advantages of anger control. Try using a reward system with your child to reinforce moments when they handle frustration, disappointment, or other anger trigger (see Rewarding Anger control). While most parents and teachers are familiar with the notion of rewarding positive behavior, they do not commonly reinforce their youngsters for not losing their temper. If your child has done better at handling frustration or disappointment, don't just provide them with tangible rewards but with payoffs that help them learn why we appreciate their efforts to control their anger. Clarify the payoffs for anger control by rewarding them with time (going to the video store or out swimming), privileges (better self-control means they can have a friend sleep over or go out to the movies) or parent support (taping a favorite show, reading a story, playing a game, preparing a favorite meal). If your son, for example, learns not to argue when it is time to turn off the computer, and then reward him with extra time on the computer or new computer software.