

FIRED UP: The Seven Anger Triggers

Anger is an emotional reaction that involves how we act, think, feel, and interact with other people. Anger occurs when we cannot get what we want or when we perceive that we are being singled out or attacked. Frustrations, disappointments, and interruptions involve the blocking of a goal. Verbal attacks and physical aggression, etc. are forms of threat. Other forms of unkindness, such as teasing or exclusion, can also trigger anger. Children get angry when they perceive injustice/unfairness, when they believe that others are treated better than them. Negative consequences/corrections, either threatened or realized, can trigger anger just as if the child was physically attacked. In some sensitive children, mild pain or discomfort triggers anger similar to being attacked.

Helping children manage their anger requires that we understand these anger triggers. How else can we help children identify and manage their feelings before they are too intense to control? Although there are basic anger control concepts that apply to all triggers, each trigger has specific skill building strategies that we can teach and practice. We can usually identify the key triggers for a child and work specifically on those.

Multiple triggers are often involved; we can be disappointed when we do not get our way and dwell on the unfairness of others getting what they want when we were equally deserving. A child can get frustrated over a difficult assignment while also viewing the teacher as overly critical or demanding. A child angered over having to stop a game might also believe that their mom or dad is being unreasonable.

Using the seven key trigger words facilitates anger control. When parents or teachers describe a situation as frustrating, or refer to an interruption, it will be easier for a child to use strategies associated with that trigger.

We have found the acronym **FIRED UP** useful since it fits quite well with our metaphor of anger as fire.

Frustration. Frustration occurs when we are trying to do something, and we are unable to accomplish our goal. It is one of the most common triggers. Frustration occurs as a function of effort we must be trying to perform or reach some objective in order to experience frustration. The degree of frustration we experience is directly related to our desire or drive; we do not get frustrated if we do not care about what we are doing. Frustration is more common in individuals who lack skills. If we do not have the ability to achieve success in our lives, we are more vulnerable to frustration. Competitive people with very high expectations or unrealistic goals set themselves up for greater frustration. While frustration is often positive, in that it reflects a strong sense of agenda, too much frustration disrupts the learning or performance process. It is a generally a trigger that responds well to the **FIRED UP** approach. We can model and proactively teach

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children a variety of skills that help them better manage their frustration. We will discuss these in the Managing Frustration section.

Interruption. Interruptions spark anger when a youngster is so absorbed or driven by their fun agenda that they cannot accept an interruption or stopping point. Children are particularly susceptible to this trigger because their fun agenda is so often externally controlled. The compelling nature of video games and other forms of screen time makes interruptions even more difficult for many children. We often start with the interruption trigger because there is greater parental control, and it lends itself to positive practice.

Request/Refusal. Requests/refusals are a particularly difficult disappointment trigger. Children generally have trouble delaying gratification because adult permission and support is so often involved in a child doing or getting what they want. Although the spontaneity of this trigger can be difficult to handle (you never know what or when children are going to want something), the specific steps of responding to a child's request are generally straightforward and effective. The anger of spoiled children is particularly difficult since they expect to get what they want simply because they want it.

Expectations. Parental expectations often trigger a child's anger because they interfere with a child's agenda. Even simple reminders of agreed upon routines or responsibilities will trigger anger in children who do not want to stop their fun or have negative attitudes about the tasks involved. There are effective approaches to task resistance that are designed to reduce conflict and emphasize qualities of kindness, helpfulness, responsibility, and respect. Since parents often control when and how expectations and reminders of responsibility are stated (we specifically use the terms expectations rather than requests) it is easier for us to work on this trigger. We can proactively build a sense of cooperation and work ethic.

Disappointments. There are lower-level disappointments involving compromise and patience that go beyond requests/refusals. As with the other triggers, disappointments are best dealt with proactively by teaching flexibility, delay of gratification and work ethic. As we consider these triggers it is important to distinguish between frustration and disappointment. Although they both occur when we do not get what we want, frustration occurs as a function of our own efforts while disappointment occurs as a function of others. The Portland Trailblazers get frustrated when they miss a shot or lose a game, their fans get disappointed.

Unfairness. Unfairness involves improper judgment or a failure to follow the rules in a way that benefits one person or group over another. People who understand and value rules tend to focus more on issues of unfairness. Adults will commonly get upset about relatively minor issues of unfairness, while children focus more on issues of disappointment. Perhaps this is because adults are far more rule-bound than children. Issues of unfairness also reflect a person's understanding of how rules are developed, why they exist and how they are applied.

Contrary to common opinion, fairness is not a matter of things being even or equal. People have different needs, and it is inappropriate to try and treat them all the same. The process of trying to

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treat children as if they are the same inevitably leads to dissatisfaction. Children will invariably compare what they get with what others receive, and then claim that receiving less is unfair. Although not getting what others receive may be disappointing, it is not truly unfair. Fairness is a function of rules or procedures being applied properly, not a matter of whether everyone is being treated the same. It is important to remember that children often refer to unfairness when they are actually dealing with different types of disappointment. It is not unfair that we do not get what we want.

Provocation. This is a complicated anger trigger that involves the perception of being attacked, teased, victimized, excluded, or rejected by others. It includes a perception of intention, that someone is trying to hurt us in some way. Individuals who lack a sense of competence, power, control, etc. are more vulnerable to this anger trigger. We often try and work with children on how to handle teasing and victimization, since they are less vulnerable when they are prepared to handle a taunt or physically defend themselves. Managing provocations goes beyond a single child. We must create an environment where harassment and victimization are unacceptable. A bully must be held accountable for their behavior.

FIRE UP: The Seven Anger Triggers Summary

- Managing anger requires that we understand the triggers.
- Each trigger has specific skill building strategies we can teach and practice.
- Frustration occurs when we are trying to do something, and we are unable to accomplish our goal.
- Interruptions spark anger when a youngster is so absorbed or driven by their fun agenda that they cannot accept an interruption or stopping point.
- Requests/refusals are a particularly difficult trigger for children.
- Parental expectations often trigger a child's anger because they interfere with child's agenda.
- These are the lower-level disappointments involving compromise and patience.
- Unfairness involves improper judgment or a failure to follow the rules in a way that benefits one person or group over another.
- Provocation is a complicated anger trigger which involves the perception of being attacked, teased, victimized, excluded, rejected, etc. by others.

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