

The Challenge of Anger Control

“Getting Angry is Easy, Controlling Anger is Hard”

Anger is a common emotion that often energizes us to take action, assert ourselves and initiate change. While there is no doubt that anger can have a negative impact, particularly upon our relationships, many of us find anger empowering and cathartic. It is often a motivational force that helps us when things are “not right” and engages others in resolving problems. While we all have experiences where our anger causes problems, most of us recognize that controlled anger can achieve positive outcomes.

Children find it more difficult to achieve similarly positive results. Since their prefrontal cortex is in its early stages of development, anger quickly hijacks the “thinking brain” and interferes with interpersonal communication and problem solving. Children lack the executive function to manage their anger. As a result, many of the cognitive and calm-down strategies helpful to adults don’t work for a child. Because they lack insight and motivation to change, children are often poor partners in the anger management process. They are typically unaware of their anger triggers or the impact their reactions have upon others.

Children encounter more frustration as they learn to navigate the world. They have less control over their environment and are more dependent upon adults. They have trouble delaying gratification and must handle the many times when they are told “no” by adults. Parents expect a degree of patience and flexibility that children don’t possess. It is also harder for children to consider future consequences as a guide to current behavior. Physiological factors, such as a lack of sleep or poor nutrition, also have a larger impact on a child’s behavior. Often neither the child nor the parent is aware of these factors.

The energizing nature of a child's anger leads to more disruptive and destructive behavior. It drives a child to negatively engage those around them, leading to arguing and physical confrontation. We suppress or punish a child’s anger reactions, disregarding the underlying passions or motivations that the anger represents. Instead, we focus on the unacceptable “choices” and the “unsafe” behavior a child exhibits when in a fit of anger. Failing to consider underlying issues, we label children as disrespectful, disruptive or oppositional. We punish them for reactions that are often beyond their control. This has led to an alarming proliferation of clinical labels, medication therapies and ineffective school policies involving zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion).

We often blame children for the same reactions and behaviors that they see in us. We expose them to angry and aggressive images and then punish them when they display similar behavior. Not surprisingly, children attempt to avoid recrimination, through minimization, denial or shifting the blame to others. Unable to manage their anger, they develop a helpless or hopeless attitude towards their ability to control their temper. Perhaps even worse, some children develop self-deprecating attitudes where they view themselves as “bad” or “crazy.” At a time when children need

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reassurance the most, they receive negative messages. We must look beyond reactive, punishing consequences and develop a proactive anger management approach.

A developmental understanding of anger leads to greater acceptance and more effective teaching of anger management strategies. Unfortunately, there is a lack of information and training for both parents and teachers. The current school training emphasis appears to be on standardizing curriculum and on standardized testing, even though teaching emotional regulation would promote academic success. Parenting materials emphasize self-calming strategies but don't acknowledge that these techniques are harder for children to learn. They also don't work as well as they do with adults. Other strategies such as time out fail to differentiate between punishment and self-regulation. They often involve a reactive instead of proactive approach. With better education, we can become far more effective teachers of anger management.

Understandably, there are increasing societal concerns regarding anger-fueled violence. As a result, we are less tolerant of childhood displays of anger at school. Zero tolerance school policies have resulted in an increase in exclusionary discipline (detentions, suspensions, expulsions), which have questionable effectiveness. When we incorrectly define a child's anger as a "choice", it triggers discipline and not support.

Helping children with anger is all about taking a proactive, preventative approach. We need to understand the nature of the child's anger and proactively address the factors that might be causing or contributing to the problem. This begins with a developmental understanding of anger and building a basic vocabulary for talking about anger and anger triggers. We then model and teach children how to handle anger triggers without losing their temper. We introduce and practice the mindsets that reduce the distorted negative thinking that fuels unhealthy anger. Action, distraction and calm down strategies can be proactively modeled and taught. We can all learn to take responsibility and make amends for the negative impact of our anger without experiencing shame or blame.

The Challenge of Anger Control Summary

- Anger can be a motivational force that helps us when things are not right.
- Children find it difficult to control their anger.
- Anger hijacks a child's "thinking brain."
- Children lack the executive function to manage their anger, calm down strategies do not work as well for a child.
- Children encounter more anger triggers than adults.
- Hard for children to consider the future as a guide to the present.
- Physiological factors, such as lack of sleep, can have a large impact on a child's behavior.
- The energizing nature of a child's anger leads to disruptive behavior.
- We punish children for the reactions that are often beyond their control.
- Children reflect the reactions they see in us.
- Children try to avoid recrimination by minimization, denial or shifting blame.
- We must develop a proactive anger management approach.
- Infectious nature of anger makes it difficult for parents to stay calm.
- Parents lack the time needed to work on anger problems.
- Parents may have difficulty identifying factors fueling their child's anger.
- Parents are too often in reactive and not proactive mode.

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