

## **Anger Problems at School: Parent Considerations**

“Life without problems is like school without classes; you’re probably not going to learn anything.

When a child has an anger problem at school, parents are often asked to speak with their son or daughter about what happened. While we want to support the school’s efforts, we shouldn’t expect too much from these conversations. Children are not particularly forthcoming or accurate about what occurred. They want to avoid difficult conversations and don’t want to get into trouble. Children are not particularly self-aware and cannot provide important information that parents require to truly understand what has happened. Children also have trouble recalling events that may have happened hours, and even days, before. Even a productive conversation may not be sufficient to avoid future anger problems.

Parents can be more helpful when they have important information from the school before they speak with their child. Daily reports, emails and follow up phone calls home can be useful but they don’t necessarily provide the level of information needed to effectively support the school’s efforts. Notification that a child has lost his or her temper at school may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. A child hitting another student in response to being pushed or teased is a much different circumstance than a youngster who hits when they don’t get their way in a game. Getting angry and refusing to come in from recess can be very different from refusing to do an assignment in class. Recurrent problems in PE or music can be very different than problems that occur in the classroom or on the bus. Families need greater detail regarding the context, the trigger, the reaction, and the impact of the anger episode.

Consequences are more effective when they can be delivered at school. Parents can, however, provide rewards at home that are unavailable at school (e.g., screen time or family fun time). Parents should be very careful about using punishing consequences at home, however, since delayed punishments tend to be less effective, and they don’t generally address underlying vulnerabilities or build anger control skills. Most parents are also understandably uncomfortable punishing their child for something that they did not witness episode or doesn’t fit what is going on at home. It is helpful to brainstorm with school staff as to what follow-up rewards or consequences are the most helpful

Emphasize making amends over using punishments. A child can write an apology or practice making an apology that they can deliver at school. Some children find making an apology very difficult and need a great deal of coaching/support to provide a proper apology. Be very careful about class apologies that can be quite embarrassing. Other amends can include doing some clean up at the school, a gift for the teacher, or doing work in the school office. Remember that an effective amends can help repair relationships and move past the anger episode.

Some children need to practice calm downs at home that they can use at school. School logistics may require different calm downs than are used at home. A child that has a calm down area at home, may be able to use the library, the counselor’s office or to the classroom next door. More physical anger workout activities may be possible in the gym. Calm down activities such as

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listening to music, looking at magazines or books, coloring or doing a Rubix cube are possible in the back of the classroom. There may be an alternative recess activity if a child loses their temper on the playground. Role playing and practicing at home will help a child actually accept and use the calm downs at school

One of the most powerful things that parents can do to support school efforts is to practice handling the school triggers. Positive practice builds anger management skills and can provide a child with the sense that they can handle future situations. Parents can role play coming in from recess, doing math assignments, handling work frustrations, responding to teasing, accepting correction, etc. In some cases, parents will actually practice with their child at the school. Teachers really feel supported when they hear about positive practice efforts at home.

Please remember that **FIRED UP** triggers can be different at school than at home. Frustration, unfairness, and provocation tend to be the more common triggers at school. Triggers involving disappointment are far more common at home. The disappointment of not getting what you want or having to stop a fun activity is far more common at home. The school environment has greater task expectations/frustrations and the peer interactions present a wider range of unfairness issues and provocations. If anger issues are more significant in one setting than another, it may reflect the type of trigger.

Situational control can be very helpful at school. Some children simply cannot handle playing basketball at recess and should not be allowed to play. Others need to do their math assignments outside of the classroom or with a tutor and not in the class. An alternative to music class might be preferable to recurring conflicts with the music teacher. Some children don't get along and shouldn't work or play together. Sometimes, there is poor fit between a child and teacher that requires an administrator's guidance or a change in classrooms.

It is important to remember that school resources are limited. Curriculum demands, class sizes, child mental health issues, staff shortages, etc. are all on the rise. There is simply not enough staff to adequately monitor recess or provide extra help in class. If you are working with an outside clinician, consider whether their involvement would be helpful to the school. If the anger issues are having a significant impact on your child's learning, emotional well-being or social relationships, please consider whether supplemental school services or a formal education plan is needed. It is particularly important to consider more specialized supports and services exclusionary discipline is repeatedly involved. Frequent loss of recess, repeated detentions and school suspensions are not solutions to anger control problems.

While there are curriculums that schools and counselors use to help with emotional regulation, training for teachers on anger control in the classroom is limited. We are working with school districts to see if the **FIRED UP** platform would be helpful. For teachers interested in learning more about anger managements I would highly recommend the book, *Anger Management: A Practical Guide for Teachers*, by Faupel, Herrick and Sharp. Other references for educators are listed in the **FIRED UP** bibliography.

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- Families need detail regarding situations, the trigger, the reaction, the impact of the anger to support school efforts.
- Follow-up consequences are more effective at school for an event that took place at school.
- Emphasize making amends over punishment.
- Practice calm downs that can be used at school.
- Parents can support school efforts by practicing how to handle triggers at home.
- Anger triggers at home and school are different, the school environment has greater task expectations/frustrations.
- Situational control can be very helpful.
- School resources are limited.
- Training for teachers on anger control in the classroom is limited.

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