

## **Building Anger Awareness**

“The first step toward change is awareness.”

Children are not particularly self-aware. If children are late to recognize such things as hunger, fatigue or even the need to go to the bathroom, how can we expect them to be aware of emerging quickly enough to use anger management strategies? It stands to reason that children would have a better opportunity to control their temper if they could recognize the different levels of risk and the anger trigger they are facing before becoming overwhelmed. Let's think about different approaches to improving anger awareness.

**Talk openly about the anger situations/triggers you face.** We can teach children anger awareness through modeling. Verbalizing our thoughts and feelings before we actually lose our temper teaches children to identify the early stages of their own anger. Noting our own hunger, thirst or fatigue helps a child learn how getting better sleep, having a snack or drinking some water helps fend off anger. Noting that a complicated task should wait till we are rested helps a child learn to avoid frustration. Acknowledging the challenge and potential frustrations in golf will teach your son or daughter how to develop anger management skills on the course.

**Describe your own emerging anger.** When we recognize that our voices are getting louder we should say so and take a moment to calm down. If we recognize tension in our bodies we should describe it so our children can see why we are taking the moment to relax. We can point out when a conversation becomes more blaming or argumentative and disengage for a while. Over time, our children will learn to do the same. Demonstrating how we are experiencing anger before we lose our temper, builds a child's self-awareness.

**Proactively reference underlying risk factors.** As we have previously discussed, there are a wide range of underlying factors that predispose all of us to getting angry. In my experience, hunger, thirst, fatigue and competitiveness are particularly common ones. When your child has a meltdown in the evening, perhaps it was because dinner was served late or because it was past his/her/their bedtime. Expecting a child to clean their room after the disappointment of a play date cancellation is almost certainly a set up for anger. When you gently suggest something to eat before going to practice, you reduce the likelihood of your daughter throwing her bat after striking out. Proactively discussing how Uno is largely a game of luck or how a piano piece is particularly challenging will help limit frustration. As we provide such perspectives, children become more attuned to their own risk factors and more of our suggestions.

**Teach levels of situational risk.** When Portlanders drive to Mt. Hood or Bend they pass billboards that identify fire risk based on how dry the forest is, the rain forecast, the temperature, etc. Presumably, the risk assessment helps us be aware of the need for fire safety. We can do the same regarding anger risk. A child may be at higher risk for disappointment when their brother or sister is having a birthday party. Frustration risk is perhaps higher for certain types of schoolwork or competitive situations (such as when they are pitching a game vs. playing right field). Some play

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dates might have a higher risk of conflict because of the personalities involved. Playing a game with a younger brother is almost certainly going to involve some potential triggers. Pre-evaluating the level of anger risk in a situation (some children will rate the risks from 1 to 5) can help us all deal with potential triggers.

**Talk about anger triggers.** Different FIRED UP triggers use different control strategies. When you describe a situation as frustrating you have readied yourself to try again, ask for help, change plans or switch tasks. Noting the potential for disappointment prepares a child to be more accepting, patient or flexible. The phrase “sorry to interrupt” readies a child to handle a transition. The very act of labeling a trigger is an anger management technique.

**Describe the early signs and stages of your child’s anger.** Although not always achievable, our ultimate goal is to help children control their temper before it controls them. We can calmly note a child’s questioning tone, increasing volume, body tension or negative thinking. Over time, describing the early signs will help a child become more aware and more receptive to an action/distraction calm down plan. Once there is an advanced level of anger or rage, our options are limited.

**Talk about anger styles.** It can be helpful to use animal metaphors to help children recognize their different anger styles. Some children roar like a lion or dinosaur. Others are more physical, perhaps like the Hulk. Some threaten like a barking dog while others draw into themselves like a turtle. Discuss and role play how anger is shown in our eyes, jaw, mouth, voice, hands, legs, feet, etc. Depending upon the level of anger, the style may change from the stern but quite librarian to the shouting style of a football coach. Please note that it can be easier to discuss anger styles by studying others; fortunately or unfortunately there is no shortage of anger models in the media that can help us with our discussion.

**Talk about the trigger levels.** Helping children think about their anger also involves assessing the degree of the trigger. Some children use a 1 to 10 “big deal scale” which helps them to more realistically appraise the significance of a disappointment, frustration, provocation, etc. Recognizing that losing a game of checkers is a level 1 or 2, and not a 9 or 10, helps us control our temper. Misplacing our wallet is not the level 8 or 9 that a serious injury might be.

**Incorporate self-monitoring and self-evaluation.** A simple chart, tracking different levels of anger (in others or in themselves) can help build self-awareness. There are a variety self-monitoring activities that can also build self-awareness. Children enjoy taking pulse counts to see how that fits with their sense of calm. They use fit bits to measure their steps. Youngsters can keep track of their negative or positive comments during homework or piano practice. A FIRED UP chart (included in the handouts) that tracks when families have faced and handled their anger triggers is an excellent visual display. Some families keep track of when they use calm downs. Another way of developing self-evaluation is to get your child to offer their opinions before you offer yours. Gentle questions, such as “How did you do at picking up your room?”, “What do you think of this report card?” or “How did the soccer game go?” helps your child become less

reliant on your feedback. Over time they will learn to reference goals, attitudes, efforts, etc. as they form their own opinions. Instead of simply telling us they had a great game they can talk about their attitudes or efforts. When they say their room is clean they describe the specific things they did to accomplish the task

**Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness emphasizes the importance of becoming more aware of sensory experiences, in the moment and without distraction. It is one of the single most powerful ways to improve self-awareness and attention. You and your child can savor a treat by noticing how it looks, smells, feels in our teeth/tongue, tastes, etc. We can brush teeth mindfully, putting our attention to the weight of the brush in our hand, the feel of the bristles on our teeth and tongue, the taste and feel of the toothpaste, the change in our teeth, etc. Families enjoy listening to a song mindfully; setting aside other activity and conversation and focusing intentionally on the tempo a song, the instruments involved, the change in tone or volume. Simply spending time eating, brushing and listening to music mindfully each day will help build the internal self-awareness that is ultimately so important to anger control. Although a complete discussion is beyond the scope of this writing, there are fortunately numerous books and Internet resources that describe simple mindfulness activities that help build self-awareness.

## **Building Anger Awareness Summary**

- You can narrate your own anger awareness.
- Proactively reference underlying risk factors.
- Teach levels of situational risk.
- Talk about anger triggers.
- Describe the early signs and stages of anger to the child.
- Talk about anger styles.
- Incorporate self-monitoring and self-evaluation.
- Practice mindfulness.

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