

Rewarding Anger Control

“Self-control is the ability to achieve one’s goals and refrain from actions that contravene those goals.”

Be positive. A **FIRED UP** approach involves focusing on the positive, not just the negative. In my experience, anger problems grab our attention but anger control does not. With that in mind, it is important to praise children for when they could have lost their temper but didn’t. Please do not take these anger control efforts for granted.

Specify triggers. Do your best to point out the specific triggers that you see your son or daughter handling well. Note how well they handled the *frustration* of losing a game or the *disappointment* of a party being rained out. Perhaps they accepted the *disappointment* of a cancelled play date or the *expectation* that they do their homework before going outside. When you reference the specific triggers your feedback is more effective.

Acknowledge anger control efforts. Children are often unaware when they are actually using anger techniques or when they have handled a trigger. You can point out the mindsets that helped them be a graceful loser or the strategies they used in handling frustration. Referring to specific anger control techniques (e.g., “I’m glad you walked away from your brother instead of hitting him”) is more helpful than a generic compliment (e.g., “Thanks for controlling your temper”).

Identify the benefits of anger control. When children cooperate and/or control their temper they are accomplishing a number of important things. Point out when they are saving time or demonstrating maturity. Self-control leads to more privileges and opportunities. A child’s responsible and cooperative behavior brightens our day and can have a positive impact on the family or an entire school classroom. Describing the benefits of self-control enhances child motivation and provides a more positive connection with a child who may be getting quite a bit of negative feedback because of their anger.

Focus on attitudes and not just behaviors. Although accomplishment is important, it is equally important to reward a child for the positive attitudes they bring to a situation. A child who responds with a “happy to help” or “right on it mom” is cooperating at a different level than a youngster who more grudgingly does what is expected. For parents using a formal reward system, consider extra credit for “can do” or “no big deal” attitudes.

Turn a negative into a positive. Despite everyone’s best efforts, children will lose their temper. Their anger is often understandable, justifiable and acceptable. Remember though that with every meltdown there is a calm down. Part of the calm down and amends process should include discussion of the positive ways they ultimately tamed their temper or made things right.

Improvements in anger control are relative. Point out how a child stayed calm when they used to get upset. Reference how their anger was far more manageable than it used to be (“you got angry but didn’t hit your brother the way you used to”). You can also identify other children who have trouble handling situations you no longer struggle with.

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Develop a reward system. Tangible rewards are particularly helpful for young children. When your child handles an anger trigger without physical aggression, verbal attacks, damaging property or disruptive behavior, provide timely and tangible praise/reward. Try and connect the reward to the accomplishment (more game time when they accept their stopping point, fun time with mom or dad when they cooperate or a small toy for taking care of their things). Some families find tangible, visible reward systems helpful such as filling a jar or plastic bottle with marbles or packing material helpful. Since the elements of anger control are relevant to all of us, multiple family members can participate (individually or as a family). When using a reward system, consider doubling the “credit” for observable anger control techniques. If a youngster keeps his or her cool by taking a deep breath, walking away, or saying, “it’s no big deal” then they get an extra “point”. Multiple anger control methods would earn multiple points. You can also increase the number of points or credits based upon the level of the anger trigger; accepting vanilla ice cream instead of chocolate may get fewer credits than waiting for ice cream till the next day.

Saving time is an excellent concept to imbue within a reward system. When a child takes “no” for an answer or cooperates with a request, they are saving us valuable time. If they control their temper, they are again saving us time. If they accept our limits without arguing, time is not wasted. Keep track of the time saved and use it to have a fun time with your child (movies, swimming, biking, etc.). Getting ready for bed with an accepting, positive attitude might allow time for a short tv show or game.

Consider adding a “response cost” component. Some children will work to control their temper if they are gently reminded that an anger outburst is going to lose them points or time from their time bank. Point out how hard they have been working to earn some privilege and how getting angry will get in the way. If they are trying to earn time to go to an arcade, they may decide not to argue about turning off the television or picking up their room. In some children, however, the notion of a “response cost” inflames them and makes things worse.

Reward positive role models. Consider reinforcing anger control that is shown by other family members. The child with an anger problem can learn from this and may be motivated to achieve similar recognition and rewards. It also helps to pair praise and reward with another family member (“you and dad both handled the disappointment of the Trailblazers losing”).

Connect the dots to build motivation. Make a list of the fun opportunities that your youngster might be looking forward to that will require anger control. Your child might want to go to a ballgame with a friend or have some friends sleep over. To get to do those things, they must show anger control improvement. They can’t very well lose their temper when a group of friends are sleeping over.

The effective use of praise and reward includes many ingredients. They are included in the reward and praise module from our Pay Attention to Attention platform (<https://learn.childrensprogram.com/catalog/>).

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Rewarding Anger Control Summary

- Point out triggers that you see your child handling well.
- Compliment your child on using anger control strategies.
- Focus on attitudes not just behaviors.
- With every meltdown there is a calm down, wait until they calm down to talk.
- Tangible rewards are helpful for young children.
- Tangible, visible reward systems can be helpful.
- Reinforce anger control by other family members as a model for your child.
- Make a list of activities that require anger control, to get do them the child must show improvement.
- Effective use of praise and reward can motivate your child.