



## Therapy for Children Managing Anger

### Understanding what Anger means

When we feel threatened, we move into fight, flight or freeze. Anger is the body's "fight" response. But we don't only get angry in response to outside threats. When something happens today that reminds us of a past upset, we get angry to protect ourselves. Even if the threat today isn't really much of a threat. When our own fear, hurt, disappointment, pain or grief is too upsetting, we tend to lash out. The anger doesn't get rid of the hurt, but it makes us feel less powerless and temporarily numbs the pain.

For children, a small disappointment can seem like the end of the world. Worse yet, since they don't have a fully developed frontal cortex to help them self-regulate, children are even more prone to lashing out when they're angry. Luckily, as children's brains develop, they gain the capacity to manage their anger constructively, if they live in a home where anger is handled in a healthy way.

### Understanding what Anger needs

"Anger is the most misunderstood of all the human emotions.... an expression of the self.... a protection of one's boundaries"

- ❖ **Awareness of how I feel angry** (notice, journal, draw, make, play)
- ❖ **Entitlement.** (It's OK to feel angry)
- ❖ **Acknowledgement.** (Name what I'm feeling angry about)
- ❖ **Find safe ways of channelling angry feelings.** (Includes healthy holding back- until able to 'let off steam')
- ❖ **Explore residual anger.** (What else do I feel angry about? Old wounding/ hurts.... how might these trigger?)
- ❖ **Psycho-educational work.** (What can I do when I experience this next time or in other settings?)



(Violet Oaklander, 1988)



## Top Tips for parents to help children manage their anger

### 1. Start with yourself.

Calm the fire not fan the flames. Stay calm yourself. Use self talk, deep breathing/mindfulness (Smiling Mind App), walk away, give yourself an excuse to distract until you are calm (pretend you have remembered something, or see something in the distance). Find a supportive person for you. Remember that all feelings are allowed. When parents accept and empathize with the child's emotions, she learns that emotions aren't dangerous and can be felt -- without necessarily being acted on. As we accept our child's anger and remain calm, she lays down the neural pathways and learns the emotional skills to calm herself down and communicate how she feels, without hurting people or property

### 2. Acknowledging the anger, as well as the more threatening feelings under the anger

If you can keep yourself from getting triggered and acknowledge why your child is upset, his anger will begin to calm. That will help him feel safe enough to feel the more vulnerable emotions driving the anger. Once the child can let himself experience his grief over the broken treasure, his hurt that his mother was unfair, his shame when he didn't know the answer in class, or his fear when his classmate threatened him, those feelings begin to heal. As those vulnerable feelings begin to fade away, he no longer needs his anger to defend against them -- so the anger vanishes.

### 3. Help your child be aware of her "warning signs."

Once children are in the full flush of adrenaline and the other "fight or flight" neurotransmitters, they think it's an emergency, and they're fighting for their lives. At that point, managing the angry impulses is almost impossible, and all we can offer them a safe haven while the storm sweeps through them. But if you can help your child notice when she's getting annoyed, where she can feel it in her body and learn to calm herself, she'll have many fewer tantrums. As she gets older, you can point out to her: "*you're getting upset. We can make this better. Let's all calm down and figure this out together.*"

### 4. Set limits on aggression.

Allowing feelings does not mean that we allow destructive actions. Children should never be allowed to hit others, including their parents. When they do, they are always asking for us to set limits and help them contain their anger. Say "*You can be as mad as you want but I will keep us all safe. You can tell me how mad you are without hurting me.*" Separate feelings from struggle against something



action. Some children really need to when they're angry. It's fine to let

them struggle against your hands, or even your holding arms, if that's what they want, but don't let yourself get hurt. Similarly, don't let children break things in their fury. That just adds to their guilt and sense that they're a bad person. Your job is to serve as a safe "container"

#### 5. *Constructive Problem-Solving*

Eventually, the goal is for your child to use the anger as an impetus to change things as necessary so the situation won't be repeated. This may include moving his treasures out of little brother's reach, or getting parental help to deal with the bully. It may also include acknowledging his own contribution to the problem, so that he resolves to do a better job following his parents' rules, or to come to class more prepared. With your help, your child will learn to calm himself when he's angry so that he can express his needs and wants without attacking the other person, either physically or verbally. He'll learn to see the other person's side of the issue and to look for win/win solutions to the problem, rather than just assuming that he's right and the other person is wrong.

#### 6. *Give your child ways to manage his angry impulses in the moment*

Children need skills to manage their anger in the moment. When your child is calm, make a list with her of constructive ways to handle emotion, practice them, and post the list on the refrigerator. Remember that what's healing isn't acting out the aggression, which can actually make the person more angry. What's really helpful for your child is that he gets to show you just how upset he is, so he feels understood. So, if your child wants to clobber something (in lieu of acting out his anger toward a person), say "*You are showing me just how mad you are about this! I see! That must be hard for you!*". Use choice "*do you want to let off steam first, or do a calming thing?*"

#### 7. *Don't send a child away to "calm down" by herself.*

Your goal when your child is angry or upset is to restore a sense of safety, which requires your calm presence. Remember that children need your love most when they "deserve it least." Instead of a "time out," which gives children the message that they're all alone with these big, scary feelings, try a "time in," during which you stay with your child and help him move through his feelings. You'll be amazed at how your child begins to show more self control when you adopt this practice, because he feels less helpless and alone.

#### 8. *Do preventive maintenance to help your child work through the emotions that come up daily.*

There are a few practices that help your child feel safe and connected, and that help her work through the emotional challenges that all children encounter in daily life:

- ❖ Respond to everything the child expresses with empathy and respect, even when you set limits. (You won't be able to be empathic 24/7. Just work on increasing your ratio.)
- ❖ Spend a minimum of 15 minutes one-on-one with each child daily, just connecting and enjoying the child.
- ❖ Use routines so your child knows what to expect, which helps children feel safer.
- ❖ Accept all the emotions your child expresses, Make it safe for him to cry when he needs to.
- ❖ Give your child control of her choices when possible.

- ❖ Always talk about melt downs when they are calm, later, lovingly, without judging, to work out what they can do next time.

### 9. Teach ways to let the anger out safely

- Pop bubble wrap
- Squish playdough
- Wrap your arms around yourself and squeeze
- Do wall push-ups
- Write down what's bothering you and rip it up
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Talk about it
- Scribble on paper and crumple it up
- Do jumping jacks
- Put the palms of your hands together, push and release
- Do stretches



### 10. Teach ways to calm down

- Traffic lights (red STOP, amber THINK and BREATHE. Green Go and make a good choice)
- Visualise with them an "Angry thermometer" or and "Anger Iceberg" and talk about how to cool it down or melt it
- Make a Calm Down safe place with sensory/soothing activities and objects for calming
- Calm breathing /mindfulness (Sesame street free "Breathe" app)
- Colouring
- Counting patterns, Say the alphabet and numbers together (A-1, B-2, C-3, etc...)
- Reading
- Weighted blanket/fleecy/cuddlies for softness
- Warm bath
- Fresh air and going outside to play, walk or run about
- Drink/snack
- Read a book about being angry
- Puzzles
- Play dough, drawing, something creative
- Watch something on TV
- Listen to music
- Imagine your favourite place

