

Tips for Managing Anger in Children

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Helping children to safely and effectively express anger requires a multifaceted approach. While teaching anger management skills to children is important, it is perhaps just as important for parents to develop and model appropriate ways of expressing anger. Below are some tips:

- Help your child learn about his/her anger triggers. Once your child has calmed down, talk with him/her about the situation. For example, ask, "What happened before you blew up today?" Then ask, "How are you going to handle this differently *next time*?" This will help your child better understand his/her triggers so he/she learns to respond differently the *next time* he/she gets angry. Know your own anger triggers as well. Once you recognize what triggers your anger, you can use a self-calming strategy to prevent situations from escalating.
- Learn to identify what your child looks like when he/she is getting angry (e.g., angry face, fists clenched). If you see your child beginning to get angry, name what you see and encourage him/her to use Deep Breathing to get calm (e.g., "You have an angry look on your face and you just started yelling—it seems like you're getting angry. Let's take slow deep breaths to get calm").
- You and your child can develop a "secret signal" (such as a gentle tap on the shoulder) that will cue your child to use the self-calming strategy. Teach the secret signal to your child's teacher and other caregivers so they can cue your child as well. Your child will be more likely to respond to the secret signal and use the calming strategy if prompted before emotions intensify.
- Help your child verbally express anger and other feelings. The more a child verbalizes feelings, the less likely he/she will have an angry outburst. Expressing anger requires your child to communicate. He/she needs to be able to start sentences with phrases like, "I'm angry because..." Remember to praise your child (e.g., "I am proud of you for telling me about your angry feelings"). It is especially helpful to ask your child about feelings when he/she *begins* to get angry (rather than when the child is

very angry), as this can prevent out of control behavior. It is also helpful to validate your child's feelings.

- If your child's anger escalates, try your very best to remain calm. This means speaking in a soft tone. Raising your voice will only make your child more angry. If your child responds to you calmly, praise him/her (e.g., "You did a great job getting calm even though you are angry. I'm proud of you and I hope you're proud of this").
- Don't try to deal with anger when emotions are running high. Any attempt to respond to your child at that point will escalate and reinforce his/her anger. Additionally, your child is not listening very well at that time. Your attempts to reason or talk to your child about the issue are not going to sink in if he/she is in the middle of a rage. Assuming your child is not in danger, say in a calm voice, "Your behavior is unacceptable and I will talk with you when you are calm." Encourage your child to use his/her safe anger strategy. Once your child is calm, he/she will be better able to listen, talk, and learn.
- If your child is being verbally aggressive toward you (e.g., yelling, swearing), do not respond to it and do not yell back. Simply leave the room or send your child to his/her bedroom. Discuss an appropriate consequence when you are both calm.
- If your child is throwing a tantrum because you set a reasonable limit, do not give in or renegotiate as this teaches your child that it is worth it to act out. Instead, ignore the tantrum and attend to your child when he/she is calm (e.g., "I really like how you calmed yourself").
- Verbalize your feelings and role-model self-calming strategies (e.g., "You're not listening to me and I'm getting angry. I'm going to do Deep Breathing to get calm").
- Don't fall into the trap of consequence stacking. For example, let's say your child is having a tantrum. You keep saying, "If you don't get it together, I'm going to take away TV for a week. Okay now it's two weeks. Now it's a month...do you want to keep going?" This response is likely to lead to more anger. It is better to take a break and come back and interact with each other later when everyone is calm.

- Don't get physical with your child. That just teaches your child to solve his/her problems with aggression. If you do lose control and get physical, model taking responsibility and apologizing (e.g., "I lost control and it was wrong for me to shove you. I apologize"). If your anger escalates to abuse, seek help.
- Praise the appropriate expression of anger. Let your child know that you notice when he/she deals with anger in a positive way.
- Use a behavior chart to encourage your child to utilize the safe anger strategy. Here's how: (1) Say to your child, "Every time you handle your anger by appropriately using your safe anger strategy (e.g., doing Deep Breathing until you are calm), I will draw a happy face on the chart. When you get 5 happy faces, you can pick something from the prize bag. (2) Involve your child in coming up with ideas for the prize bag. Ideally, items in the prize bag should be non-material rewards that encourage positive time together (e.g., play a board game with Mom/Dad; have a family movie night; bake cookies together; build a fort with Mom/Dad; have an indoor picnic; get an extra story at bedtime or 15 minutes of extra cuddles at bedtime). Write each prize item on a separate slip of paper, fold it, and place it in the prize bag. (3) Give happy faces and rewards consistently.