

OTHER TITLES

Create It

Teaching your children to talk about their feelings

How can I help my young child learn to get along with others?

If you're a parent, you're a role model: How to teach your children by example

Nurture It

How can I teach my young child to deal with peer pressure?

Teaching your children the truth about drugs and gambling

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Helping your teen work through anger

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YOU'VE GOT AN ANGRY KID on your hands, and you're feeling frustrated and confused. You might be close to anger yourself. At times, you may be afraid of your child's anger. You may even be afraid of your child. Keep in mind that teens can learn everything that an adult can about coping with anger.

Anger is a normal emotion. We all feel it sometimes. Learning to manage it is a normal part of growing up, and you, as a parent, are in the best position to help your son or daughter manage their anger.

Anger as a symptom

Anger can be a wonderful emotion. It lets us know that something is wrong. It helps us know when our buttons are being pushed, our values are not being respected, or our boundaries are being crossed. But unresolved anger can make you physically sick, or show up later as a chronic anger problem. Often, people find a way of not feeling the anger: they may get depressed, or use alcohol and other drugs, or take up habits like gambling.

Anger is usually a symptom of other underlying emotions. Before people get angry, they have other feelings that are the actual root of their anger: irritation, frustration, fear, dislike.

For example, suppose your daughter discovers the whole class knows she has a crush on a certain boy—and the information came from her best friend. She feels several emotions. Loss: "Now he'll be too embarrassed to ask me out." Hurt: "I trusted her and she spilled my secret." Powerlessness: "I wish I had never told her, but I can't 'unsay' it now, or erase it from everyone's memory." She becomes angry at her friend, not just because of what the friend did, but also because of the consequences to her.

Your daughter will need to deal with all of these feelings at some time in her life.

Anger masks the overwhelming combination of these feelings. If you can help her face them, you can help her understand where anger comes from, and help her deal with other situations that make her angry. You can empower her by helping her understand and control her emotions.

Angry thoughts, feelings, actions

The emotion of anger involves thought, feeling and action. Change any of these and you can take control of anger. For example, when your child does not come home in time for supper, the way you choose to see their behaviour (the thought) will determine how you will feel.

You might think: "That kid doesn't care about the family. They've abused a privilege again." Such thoughts leave you feeling used and not respected. When your child walks in 35 minutes later, the earlier feelings become anger, and you may blow up, shouting things that you don't really mean. The thought drives the feeling, which drives the action.

What if you thought: "This is normal behaviour. All kids will push the boundaries when they're having fun and they've got a curfew"? You might feel frustrated, but you would know that teaching kids to respect the rules is a normal chore that every parent must do, not an injustice visited on you by your particular child. When your kid comes home, you will be asking yourself, "What's the best way to get them to do what the family needs them to do?" You will be likely to choose a more rational way of behaving, based on what you know about your child.

In the same way, you can help an angry child to find another way of thinking about a frustrating situation. Changing the angry thought prevents angry feelings and angry behaviour. But you can also change the situation by working on the other two aspects of anger.

Angry feelings

The starting point in dealing with angry feelings is to name the feeling. You can say to your child, "I can see why you're angry" without judging them. This helps kids to accept where they are, and helps them to learn to recognize and name their feelings.

The goal here is to get at the underlying feelings, but first your child needs to let go of some of the anger. There are many techniques for doing this. These include exercise, massage, hot baths, deep breathing, prayer, meditation and soothing music.

Teach kids to express their feelings to others in another form: "When you [action] I feel [name emotion]." The daughter in the example on page one could say to her friend: "When you tell my secrets, I feel hurt." With this kind of statement, called an "I" statement, the speaker takes responsibility for their feelings. Point out to your children that no one else can make them angry; no one can make them feel anything. Tell them: "The only person who can change your feelings is you."

Angry actions

Angry actions include angry words (insults, protests), faces (sulking, frowning, glaring) or deeds (punching, slamming doors). All of these actions can hurt others. If kids can learn to pause before they act out anger, they have the chance to examine their angry thoughts and their underlying feelings without the extra stress of dealing with the consequences of their angry actions.

Angry actions are only necessary when our survival is threatened. Sometimes this means psychological survival. If someone keeps hurting your feelings, and you are not able to stop them in any other way, you may have to use angry words. Teach your kids to make sure that they have had time to think about those words, and that they have made a definite decision to use them because nothing else is available.

Cooling down

Tell your kids that the best thing to do when they're angry is to remove themselves from the situation. It is also the best

thing to do when someone else is angry. It is difficult to reason with an angry person, and you can't expect yourself or your kids to make good decisions when angry. You cannot teach your child to handle anger better while she or he is angry.

Within the family, you could choose a cool-down signal (like the "T" used to ask for a time-out in basketball and other team sports). This acknowledges that kids are angry, but gives them some responsibility for controlling their anger. You can then give them the time and space to practise a cooling technique, such as deep breathing or counting to 10.

Teach anger management before anger happens

Every time you help kids to understand why they were angry, you're teaching them to handle their feelings better the next time. Understanding begins with acceptance. Kids can accept their anger while they are feeling it. After they cool down, they can understand it. These are steps that you can use to manage anger:

1. Admit to yourself that you are angry.
2. Allow yourself to feel anger, without guilt.
3. Cool the heat.
4. Write out what you're angry about, what some of the feelings are behind the anger, and what you know about yourself from this incident. The activity sheet on the last page will help you do this.
5. Make a decision about what you want to do about the situation that made you angry. The activity sheet will help you do this.

Addiction and mental health counsellors can help you find more information on dealing with anger, and can help you decide whether your teen needs more help than you can give them.

For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

Activity Page

Feeling, Thinking, Learning, Acting and Winning

This activity sheet will help you to work through steps 4 and 5 of anger management.

Anger

Feeling “against the world”

I am angry at _____ because
(name of person you are angry with)

 (“how things shouldn’t be” statements)

Example: I’m angry at Sean because he borrowed my bike without asking, and I got worried and ran around looking for it.

Root feelings

Feeling “in me” and learning about me (doesn’t have to list every feeling)

I feel _____ because

Example: I feel irritated because Sean borrowed my bike without asking me.

Learning

Learning about my anger

Example: I get angry when people borrow my stuff without asking.

Learning about me (positive)

(Write as much as you like, continuing on a separate sheet of paper if needed.)

Example: I am someone who takes good care of my bike and values it. I am someone who respects other people enough to always ask them before borrowing their things. I am someone who wants to be treated with respect. I am someone who wants to treat other people with respect.

Acceptance

Look at feelings of powerlessness—anger always involves some of this. Write the things that you wish would be true, the thing you cannot change. As you write, recognize that these are things you cannot change. If you can, accept that wishing for these things is a waste of time, and let go of it.

Example: I wish he had asked me before he took the bike. I wish I had not wasted all that time looking for my bike, getting upset, worrying it was stolen. I wish he had the same values about other people’s possessions that I have.

Action

Remember that this doesn’t always mean changing the world to suit you. It may mean that you decide that you overreacted, you’ve really let go of it, and you don’t need to do anything outward. Inward action (like letting go of it) is still action.

Action Step 1: What do I want that I can have?

Example: Respect

For Sean to ask before he borrows my stuff.

For Sean to apologize.

Action Step 2: What is the best action to take to get what I want?

The best action does not guarantee that you get what you want. It's just the best possible way to get what you want.

Example: Talk to Sean.

Action Step 3: Lining the action up with what you want.

I want _____

Action: _____

Examples: I want respect.

Action: Treat him with respect, and show him that I respect myself.

I want him to ask before he borrows.

Ask him for a written agreement that he will ask before he borrows anything again. Give him a consequence for not asking (e.g., I'll bar him from borrowing any of my stuff ever).

I want him to apologize:

Explain why asking is important to me. Tell him how his behaviour affects me, using "I" statements so he won't get defensive. Point out that I always ask before I borrow anything of his.

Winning

List goals that you can definitely get to if you work through your anger all the way.

Examples:

I will understand my anger better.

I will have practice telling someone calmly what I need.

I will have stood up for myself.

I will have given Sean the chance to act decently. If he can't do that, then I have given myself more information about this friend, and I can decide if I want to keep the friendship or not.