

Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



Fact Sheet

The Anger Zone

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There he goes off again—fists clenched, face reddened, and screaming foul words at the top of his lungs. And look at her—withdrawn, sullen, sitting in the corner all by herself. These two children are in their “anger zones.” Ever find yourself or your children in the “zone”? Keep reading. We will explore anger and how parents can help children learn and use the tools of effective anger management now and for the rest of their lives.

Anger is a normal, healthy emotion. Feeling angry is an unavoidable part of being human, regardless of age. It is so very important for parents and their children to understand and appreciate this emotion so they can learn to express it in appropriate ways.

Three Components of Anger

Anger is believed to have three components (Lewis & Michalson, 1983). The first component of anger is the emotion itself, and can be defined as the arousal state. Anger is usually a secondary emotion that goes along with whatever sets your child off in the first place. The emotions of embarrassment, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, frustration, or hurt actually trigger the angry feelings.

The second component is the expression of anger, or how children tell others that they have become angry. Some children vent or express anger through facial expression, crying, sulking, or talking. Others actively resist by physically or verbally defending their positions or possessions in non-aggressive ways. Still other children express anger with aggressive revenge by retaliating or lashing out.

The third component is the understanding of anger, or how children interpret and evaluate the emotion of anger. Children are more likely to regulate how they express their anger after they understand their emotions. Parents and other caring adults in their lives need to provide guidance that will help children understand their anger zone.

Anger Cues

Anger is usually a signal that something is not quite right. It may mean we are feeling hurt or threatened, our rights have been stepped on, or our needs/wants are not being met. Feelings of anger may come from external events (things that happen to us from the outside) or internal thoughts (what we think about what’s happening). These feelings can vary in intensity—from mild upset to wild rage. Regardless of the source, there is nothing wrong with feeling angry. Anger becomes a concern when people are not able to express or deal with their feelings of anger in appropriate ways. Poor coping skills often lead to hurtful, destructive behaviors, like fighting, vandalism, and self-inflicted harm. Persistent feelings of anger can also lead to hostility, hatred, and patterns of aggressive behavior.

The ability to feel and express anger is linked to the overall process of child development. Certain periods of time during a child’s youth can bring on more frustrations (toddlerhood and adolescence in particular) because at these stages children are trying to understand what they are and are not allowed to control. The development of the basic cognitive processes of memory, language, and self-regulation helps children gradually develop the understanding of anger.

Dealing with Anger

Family interactions with children impact their emotional growth and how they feel and express anger. Ask yourself—as a parent—how do I handle my anger? Am I a screamer, slammer, thrower, or stuffer? Many children learn to express anger by mirroring their parents’ reactions to it. It is not enough to tell children what to do or how to handle anger. Rather, they must see effective ways of dealing with anger in their day-to-day observations of

others. Children learn by watching what adults do, not by listening to what adults say! In addition, if children often experience anger within their families, they will be more likely to develop patterns of thinking and acting in angry ways in the future. Parents who recognize anger as a normal emotion will strive to teach their children appropriate ways to deal with anger in the family. Here are some suggestions.

- Anger is good for identifying problems but not good for solving them. It reveals that something is wrong and requires adjustments to expectations or demands. Helping children understand that anger is the way to identify problems, but not solve them, is the first step toward a healthy anger management plan.
- Help children recognize the early warning signs of anger. Many times children act out before they realize they are angry. Do you know your child's frustration cues? Ask them, "how can you tell when you're getting frustrated or out of control?" Some common cues in children are: tensed body; noises like growls or pouts; clenched teeth; unkind words; restlessness; withdrawal; and squinting or other facial expressions. Begin to point them out to your child. Give names to the emotions. Talk about your own cues that help you know you are angry. Eventually children will recognize their own anger zones based on their anger cues and be able to identify when their anger is intensifying.
- Teach your child to take a break from the difficult situation. One of the healthiest responses to anger is to step back and regroup. Maybe it's just to take a deep breath or maybe it's leaving the room to settle down. Stepping back allows the child to stop the escalation of the emotion and determine a better response. Model this behavior when you are angry with family members and allow them to step back when they are angry with you.
- Help your child know what to do when they feel angry. There are three positive choices: talk about it, get help, or slow down and protect relationships. These choices are actually skills to be learned. Children often misuse them or overly rely on just one. Take time to teach your children these skills and practice them as responses to angry feelings.
- Don't get sucked into dialog with an enraged child. Talking about it is important but wait until the child has settled down, whether it's a two-year-old screaming or a 14-year-old raving. The child who is enraged has lost control and talking often leads to more intensity and escalation. If talking about it causes tempers to flare, stop the process, take a break, and resume the dialog after everyone has calmed down.
- Model, discuss with, read to, and teach your children about anger. There are good books and videos that are designed for children at various age levels. Ask your local librarian for suggestions. Talk about appropriate responses. Work together as a family to identify anger triggers and choose constructive solutions to try before you are in the "anger zone."
 - When anger problems seem out of control or you just don't know what to do, ask a third party to provide the helpful suggestions and guidelines to motivate the whole family to deal with anger in more effective ways. Children can develop bitterness and resentment in their lives and may need help to deal with it. Unresolved anger can create problems in relationships now and later on. Professional help may be needed. A school counselor, psychologist, or clergy are good helpers.

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