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# Dealing with Anger

Michael's mother calls out to him "Michael, please let your sister have a turn at the computer." She doesn't hear a sound. When she turns to look at him, his teeth are clenched, his face is red and he's ready to attack. Michael looks at his mother with big angry eyes and yells "NO! You can't make me! She's too little! She doesn't know what she's doing, and she always wants to use the computer when I'm on line!"

Anger - everyone feels this emotion sometimes. Anger can take many forms including irritation, disappointment, frustration or fury. As children grow, they express anger in different ways. Infants may cry, kick and wave their arms. Toddlers throw temper tantrums. Toddlers and preschool children can't put their frustrations into words, so they may release anger by hitting a person or animal, or damaging an object.



Children may cry or sulk because they are angry. They may avoid or ignore the person they blame for their anger. Children especially become angry when someone takes something from them and when they are teased or asked to do something they don't want to do.

As children's ability to speak and communicate increases, they often express anger verbally as well as physically, as Michael did. Older children may hit, tease, yell at and bully others.

Of course, teens and adults feel anger too. Research shows that high levels of anger and aggression in teens are associated with an increase in substance abuse, delinquency and vocational and school related problems.

So, even if anger is a natural emotion, it's important to think about how adults and children express anger. When expressed in negative ways, anger can lead to physical or emotional problems. When anger is used in positive ways, it can help us to express our feelings, influence others and resolve conflicts. Anger can give us the energy to reach our goals and change for the better.

Helping children deal with anger is no simple task. Often, a child's angry outburst can make a parent feel angry too. A reaction like Michael's could make the most patient parent angry. Take a few minutes to think about how you might react to Michael.

Some parents may feel like yelling at, threatening or hitting Michael. But when parents express anger in aggressive or violent ways, they can hurt their children physically and emotionally. Also, through their actions, they are showing children that it is okay to talk in a disrespectful way, scream at, hit, slap, kick and hurt others as a way of expressing anger. Most parents don't want to teach this lesson.

Other parents may want to walk away from the situation or pretend they are not angry. However, avoiding or hiding angry feelings may keep conflicts and problems from being resolved. These negative reactions to anger may leave both parents and children feeling confused or resentful.

Try the following suggestions to think about your anger and how you might deal with it:

**Recognize your feelings and why you become angry.**

Sometimes parents react without thinking. For example, your first reaction to behavior like Michael's might be to slap your child and sit him or her in a chair for time out. Before moving, or saying anything, *stop*. Think about what is going on in your mind and body.

Our bodies tell us we are angry by giving us signals. We may feel hot and flushed. We may have a tense stomach, a pounding heart or clenched fists. We may feel like running away and avoiding the situation entirely. These are signals to calm down.

Once you get used to stopping and thinking about the messages from your body, you may have a clearer idea about what things make you angry. It may not bother you when your child beats loudly on a toy drum or your teen talks on her cell phone for hours. However, when your child challenges your authority, you may feel angry. The "triggers" are different for everyone. What are your "triggers" – when your child says, "I hate you" or demands you to do something or buy something for him or her?

By stopping and thinking, you may also begin to recognize the reasons for your anger. For example, when Michael defied his mother, she may have felt a loss of power or rejection. Or, she may have felt frustrated because she wants Michael to understand his sister's needs and share with her.

When you stop to think before reacting, you may learn that there are many factors that add to your anger. Work, busy schedules or financial worries may make you feel tense and tired.

Learning to understand your anger will help you to use it in positive ways. If you know what makes you feel angry and why, you can find ways to change a situation. Adults who acknowledge and take responsibility for their own angry feelings generally are effective in helping children manage their anger.

**When you realize that your face is hot and your fists are clenched, pay attention to these signals.**

Calm down. Take a deep breath, count to ten, or get away from your child. If there's another adult at home or if your child is a pre-teen or teen, leave your child and go outside for a minute. If you're alone and you have a young child, put your child in a safe place such as a crib or bedroom for a few minutes. Go into the bathroom and close the door. Take some deep breaths or splash water on your face.

**When you've calmed down, try to empathize with your child.**

Ask yourself, "If I were my child, how would I feel?" You may realize, for example, that your child wants to be independent. Children often feel angry when they are told what to do. Even young children like to have choices and make their own decisions.

Children may feel insecure because of the attention their brothers or sisters receive. Children's outbursts may be a way to test their parents' love. To show empathy, tell your child you understand his or her feelings. Michael's mother might have said, "You really feel angry, Michael. It's hard for you to share with your sister."

**When you understand your feelings and your child's, you may be able to think of some positive responses.**

Think about your job at that moment – to teach your child how to deal with anger. Don't hide your feelings. Try to express them in words. For example, say, "I feel angry when you yell at me. I also feel sad that you don't want to share with your sister. Let's think about some ways to solve this problem."

The suggestions listed above are similar to those you can use to help your child deal with his or her own anger. Already you have taken the most important teaching step. You've shown your child how you deal with your feelings. By stopping and finding a way to release your anger, you show your child there are positive ways to calm down.

By understanding his or her feelings, you show that feeling anger is natural. You also show empathy. Putting your own feelings into words helps your child to identify and label feelings. It also shows that talking is a good way to deal with anger. Here are some other ways to help your children learn to deal with their angry feelings:

1. Help your children find positive ways to release angry feelings. They can use their energy to run around the yard, bang a drum or bounce a basketball. Buy your teen a meditation or guided image tape to help release tension. Or suggest he or she take deep breaths or take a "time out" to calm down.
2. Help your children to recognize their feelings by putting them into words. "You are angry. Your face is red, your fists are clenched and your body is tense. When I ask you to share with your little sister you become so angry. It's hard to share. Sometimes she gets in the way of you doing what you want, doesn't she?"
3. Encourage your child to think of different ways of thinking about or interpreting a behavior or situation. "I don't want to keep you from being on the computer or interfere with what you're doing. But I do want your sister to become comfortable with the computer and learn to use it."
4. Set limits. Anger should be allowed but aggression should not. What's the difference? Anger is a feeling. Aggression is an action that is meant to harm or destroy something or someone. You may have to physically restrain young children when they are angry so they don't harm themselves or others. Do so calmly and gently, but firmly.
5. Teach problem solving. Help your children think of the outcomes of acting aggressively when they're angry. Also, help them think about ways to solve their problems. If your child is angry because you asked him or her to share, what could your child do besides yelling or hitting? Ask for some ideas and help your child by giving some suggestions. He or she could say "I don't want to share now." Or, your child may offer a different toy and say, "I want my ball. You can have my truck."
6. Teach your child to be assertive, not aggressive. By helping children and teens express their feelings and needs in a respectful way, we help them become assertive rather than aggressive.

Sometimes children and teens act aggressively because they feel they don't have friends, or they feel isolated in their school or community. If this is the situation with your child, help him or her find ways to contribute in your family, at school or to the community. Helping in a meaningful way with family chores, caring for an elderly neighbor, or cleaning up a neighborhood park are some ways children can feel important, responsible and a part of their family and community. Feeling connected often helps to decrease children's sense of anger.

Research tells us that youth who receive help from their families to manage their anger appear to gain many benefits over youth who do not have strong family support. They have more positive moods, better social

skills, better psychological well being and are better able to manage physical reactions to stress. When children learn to manage their anger in their families, they show less anger and more positive social skills during conflict situations with their peers.

**Remember**

- Help your children find positive ways to release angry feelings.
- Help them to identify their “triggers” and responses to anger.
- Help them put their feelings into words.
- Teach your children problem solving skills to deal with conflict and anger.
- Set limits. Angry feelings are natural. Violence and aggression are not allowed.

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