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Helping children learn to manage anger

What causes anger?

Everyone experiences anger. It is a normal reaction to frustration, stress or disappointment. It can occur in children as young as three or four months old. Anger can be quite noticeable in toddlers who often express it through tantrums and other aggressive actions. However, as they grow and develop most children learn how to deal with some of the frustrations of everyday life. They also learn how to express their anger in acceptable ways.

Some anger can be helpful. For example, when expressed appropriately anger can help tell someone else: “Stop. I don’t like that.” Anger can also motivate us to overcome problems and achieve goals. Whether children’s anger is positive or negative depends on how effectively it is managed and whether it can be directed towards positive goals.

When children lack skills for managing anger it can lead to aggressive behaviour. Usually, it is the aggressive action that follows anger that most concerns parents, carers and teaching staff. Learning to manage anger involves developing social and emotional skills for calming down and having ways to express angry feelings assertively. This means learning to use words rather than aggressive actions to communicate feelings. Parents, carers and teaching staff have an important role in helping children learn to manage anger effectively.

The experience of anger

Feeling angry involves changes within the body and also in thinking. Muscles tense and there is a burst of energy as the heart speeds up, blood pressure rises and breathing becomes faster. These changes can lead to having a flushed or red face and to feeling hot. Symptoms of anger like these are part of the ‘fight or flight response’ that helps to prepare the body for fighting.

Thoughts also play a big part in anger. Angry thinking can trigger angry feelings and make them last longer, so learning to understand and change thinking patterns is very important for managing anger. With help from adults children can develop skills for recognising and changing angry thinking.



What do children get angry about?

Angry feelings are usually the result of being frustrated while trying to reach a goal. Researchers have found that children feel angry (rather than sad) when they believe that the negative situation they are concerned about can or should be changed.

Different kinds of situations can lead to angry feelings in children. Some of the most common situations are listed in the table to the right.

Kind of situation	What leads to anger
Possessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being allowed/able to have something they want. • Having someone take their things.
Physical aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being hit, kicked, punched, etc.
Verbal aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having others (children or adults) speak to them aggressively.
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being required or forced to do something they don't want to.
Rejection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being excluded from social games. • Being rejected by other children.
Unmet emotional needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling unsafe. • Feeling uncared for.

Differences in children's use of anger

Before they start school most young children have learned that getting aggressive when angry is not considered appropriate behaviour. They may have also learned some strategies for managing anger, for example counting to ten, explaining what they are annoyed about, or asking an adult for help to resolve a problem. These are positive coping strategies that help children manage their angry feelings and build skills for effective relationships.

Some children try to manage angry feelings by avoiding the situation or person that has led them to be angry. Children who use this kind of strategy very often do not build effective skills for relating to others, which can cause them problems in later years.

Some other children seem to have few strategies for managing anger and so may continue to act aggressively and impulsively. Children with anger problems are often rejected by other children because of their difficult behaviour. Feeling rejected, they may think others are being mean to them and become more angry. This may start a pattern of thinking that leads them to respond with aggressive behaviour even

where no intention to hurt is present.

For example, they may get angry when somebody bumps into them and react aggressively without stopping to think that it may have been an accident.

The different ways that children manage anger are influenced by a combination of personal characteristics, how much stress the child and family are under, and opportunities available at home and school for learning how to cope with feelings and manage anger.

From early childhood some children seem to react more to frustration and take longer to return to a calm state. These children may need extra assistance to learn skills for controlling anger. Some children don't learn how to manage anger because being angry is not okay in their families. They don't get the chance to practise positive ways of managing anger or telling others when they are angry. Children can also learn aggression through the examples of others. When the adults responsible for children's care get angry quickly and often, or when they use reactive, harsh and inconsistent discipline, children are more likely to behave aggressively themselves.

Research indicates that physical aggression in children is most common at the age of two. As skills for language and thinking develop, aggressive behaviour is reduced. However, for some primary school children aggression remains at a high level. These children are likely to need professional help to learn to control aggression and stop behaviour problems becoming worse. For more information see the KidsMatter resource pack on *Children with serious behaviour problems*.



Skills for coping with anger

Usually feelings of anger are directed towards someone or something that the child would like to change. Even though there may sometimes be good reasons for wanting to change things, it is often not helpful to act in anger. Intense angry feelings very often cloud judgment and lead to impulsive or aggressive behaviour rather than thoughtful actions. For children to be able to manage anger effectively they need to learn to recognise when they are angry, have strategies to manage angry feelings and work out effective ways to solve the problem that has caused their anger.

Recognise anger signals

Learning to recognise when they are getting angry helps children understand how angry feelings work. This is the first step to managing them. Children can be taught to be aware of what triggers their anger. Then they can learn strategies to help them cool down and stay calm instead of getting carried away by angry feelings. Young children need assistance with learning, remembering and using the steps. The following table shows common body, thought and action signals for anger.

Common body, thought and action signals for anger

Body signals	Thought signals	Action signals
Fast breathing	I hate her	Threaten
Heart rate increased	It's not fair!	Run away
Sweating increased	You IDIOT!	Swear
Red face colour	I want to hit him	Punch/hit
Body feels hot	I WON'T do it	Fidget
Tense muscles	You think I never do anything right!	Yell

Parents, carers and teaching staff may need to help children to recognise the signs of anger when it is beginning. Adults can tell when children are getting angry by the way they look, the way they speak, or the tension in their bodies. Saying, "You look upset. Are you angry about ...?" helps to build awareness of feelings and also invites children to talk about the problem situation.

Manage angry feelings

Children need skills to help them cool down their anger. Simple relaxation techniques involving deep breathing, calming strategies (e.g., counting to ten) and coping self-talk are very useful for helping children 'lower the temperature' of their anger (see further detail in the accompanying page *Helping children to cool down and stay calm*). For some children it may be especially beneficial to have a special place for 'quiet time' where they can get away from anger triggers while they cool down. It is important to note that the physical symptoms of anger take a long time to return to normal. Having a cool down strategy helps children learn the steps to manage their angry feelings.

Solve problems

Once they have calmed down, thinking through the situation that made them angry can help children to come up with other ways of approaching it. Parents, carers and teaching staff can support children's skills for solving problems by asking questions that help children think things through. Questions to ask include:

- What happened?
- How did you feel and react?
- How did the other person feel and react?
- What could you have done differently?
- What could you do differently next time?

Adults may need to help children through the steps by giving examples and suggestions for them to think through. (For more on helping children learn to solve problems see the KidsMatter resource pack on *Helping children make decisions and solve problems*.)

General principles for helping children learn to manage anger

For children to learn to manage anger effectively they need adult support and guidance.

They need to know that anger is a normal human emotion and that there are acceptable ways of expressing it. They need to feel understood and supported rather than judged or blamed for feeling angry.

- **Be a model for children**

Children learn effective ways of managing anger from seeing adults manage their anger effectively. Show them how you use appropriate ways to tell others you are angry and sort out problems.

- **Discuss feelings**

Using words to discuss anger, frustration, annoyance, irritation, etc. helps children learn that having angry feelings is normal and is something that can be talked about. This helps children with understanding feelings and with feeling understood. It also makes it easier for them to recognise that some ways of reacting to anger are okay and others are not.

- **Anticipate and prepare**

Parents, carers and teaching staff can help children manage their anger by identifying situations that often trigger angry responses and being prepared to offer support. This may include getting children engaged in activities that will take them away from a situation they find stressful. It may involve planning with an individual child in advance how he or she can handle a challenging situation.

- **Use positive discipline**

Providing specific praise when children manage their anger well supports their learning. Setting clear rules and predictable consequences for children's behaviour helps them know what you expect. When limits are made clear and praise is provided for appropriate behaviour children find it easier to develop the self-discipline they need to manage anger effectively. (For more on positive discipline see the KidsMatter resource pack on *Effective discipline*.)

Further ideas for helping children with anger are provided in the accompanying materials:

- *Kids and anger: How to help*
- *Talking with children to help them manage anger*
- *Helping children to cool down and stay calm*

For further information on helping children manage anger look for the accompanying KidsMatter list *Helping children learn to manage anger – Other resources*.

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au