

Plain Talk

About how to deal with an angry child



Anger – it’s a fact of life.

Everybody gets angry. You do, and so does your child. But figuring out what to do with that anger is tough. It makes parenting one of the hardest jobs in the world.

What do you do with an angry child?

Letting your anger or your child’s get out of hand is dangerous. But so is hiding it. Hidden anger only smolders until it explodes later “for no good reason.”

The first thing you can do is get control over your own feelings.

It will help if you think of your job at that moment as a teaching job. Little Jimmy or Susy probably doesn’t understand the strong feelings building up inside, obviously doesn’t know what to do with them, and may well be frightened at the sense of going out of control.

In fact, the anger of a child is often an easily available substitute for some other feeling the child can’t identify. A child will act angrily when the real problem is deeper and more frightening: a feeling of failure, low self-worth, loneliness, boredom, fear, confusion, or even sadness. If you can help the child discover what feeling lies under the anger, and talk with him or her about it, the anger is likely to lessen or even disappear.

Remember that anger is a natural human feeling.

Your child has a right to feel and express anger. So do you. Just as everyone has a right to feel hunger, happiness, or sadness.

But anger is different from aggression.

Aggression is an attempt to hurt someone or destroy something. It infringes on the rights of others. This distinction may help you to react appropriately to the many kinds of upsetting things an angry child may do.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with an angry child.

Some are designed to help the child avoid unnecessarily frustrating situations. Some are on-the-spot actions you can take when you see your child is having a problem.

Catch your child being good.

Every day find lots of ways to praise your child’s good behavior – and you’ll start seeing more of it. Some examples: “I really liked it that you came in for dinner today without being reminded.” “Thanks for hanging up your clothes after school. I know you were in a hurry to get out to play.” “You sure were patient when I was on the phone.” “Thanks for telling the truth about what really happened.”

Ignore inappropriate behavior that can be tolerated.

Ignoring it is one way of showing the child that the behavior is inappropriate. This doesn’t mean you should ignore the child, just the behavior.

Make it easy for your child to be good.

Give him or her plenty of opportunity for physical exercise to let off extra energy. Plan surroundings so that unnecessary temptations aren’t there. Make sure the child isn’t too “crowded in” by cramped physical space or overly confining rules and regulations.

Use closeness and touching.

Sometimes a sudden hug or show of affection will help an angry child regain control. You can move physically closer to a child to calm him or her and help the child curb the angry impulse.

Say “NO!”

In order to stay within limits, a child needs a clear idea of what those limits are and needs to be free to operate within them.

Explain situations.

Understanding a situation can help a child understand the cause of the anger and begin to calm down. Your explanation can include telling the child how you feel and asking for consideration. Example: "Playing your drum usually doesn't bother me, but today I have a headache. Could you please do something else?"

Help your child build a good self-image.

If your Jimmy is convinced he is a "bad boy," then you can be sure he will act like one. He needs to know he is a valued and valuable person, that he has strengths as well as weaknesses, that he is able to reach his goals, that his angry feelings don't make him a bad person.

Teach your child to express anger in words.

Talking is an acceptable steam valve and helps the child to avoid "blowing up." If Susy is free to tell her little brother, "I don't feel like sharing just now," and if that desire is respected, chances are she isn't going to slug him the minute you turn your back. Teach her to put the angry feelings into words instead of fists.

Be a good model.

If you hit Susy because she hit her baby brother, will she believe you when you say it's wrong to hit people?

Use physical restraint – carefully.

Sometimes physical restraint is necessary to stop a child from hurting himself or herself or others. This also will help the child save face. Physical restraint is not a means of punishment or angry behavior by you or a chance for other children to ridicule your child. Neither should it hurt the child physically or emotionally. This is simply a way of saying, "You can't do that."

Use punishment cautiously.

Your rule might be, "Is this punishment educational or just a way for me to let off steam?" Let off steam some other way, and then decide what action is needed to correct your child's behavior.

Help is not far away.

If you ever think you're in a situation you can't handle, don't hesitate to get help. Maybe you need to talk to your spouse, a friend or a neighbor.

For parent education and support groups in your area,

call your County Extension Family Living Agent or Prevent Child Abuse Wisconsin
211 S. Paterson St., Ste. 250, Madison, WI 53703
(608) 256-3374 or 1-800-CHILDREN
www.preventchildabusewi.org

You can call a parent helpline for assistance.

Milwaukee: (414) 671-0566
Madison: (608) 241-2221

If you want professional counseling, call a local social agency or county social services/human services department. If the agency you call doesn't offer the kind of service you want, ask to be referred somewhere else.

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