

Expressing anger

What's appropriate—and effective?

by Bill Thompson

It's 3:30 p.m. in your after-school program, and the children are settling down to work in their chosen interest areas. Johnny, age 8, who has been looking for triangle blocks on the shelf, explodes into a raging fit, slamming blocks to the floor.

Your cheeks flush with anger, and you feel you're on the verge of losing control. How do you handle your frustration? What resources do you have to cope with Johnny's outburst? How do you teach Johnny, as well as the rest of the class, appropriate ways to deal with anger?

Handling anger is an example of many situations that arise for caregivers and teachers during a typical day. Knowing effective strategies that you can use on a moment's notice can make the difference between being an effective teacher and one who is constantly frustrated.

What is anger?

Anger is a naturally occurring emotion within the repertoire of human experience. In most cases, it is natural and healthy. When handled well, anger is an adaptive response to threats. It motivates an individual to take appropriate action in many areas of life. In some cases, anger is also a strong inducement to protect oneself and loved ones when threatened.

Anger is defined in Webster's dictionary as "a strong feeling of displeasure." This definition gives no indication of the wide range of anger or the intensity of this emotion. Anger can range from mild annoyance to extreme rage and fury. It is usually in the fury stage that anger gets a bad rap. When we don't address our anger, it shows up in different ways.

Anger arises from frustration over internal or external events. Traumatic memories or events that enraged a person in the past can also trigger angry feelings.

How do we deal with anger?

People cope with anger by using a variety of methods, both conscious and unconscious. The three most commonly used approaches are suppression, calming, and expression.

Suppression. A common misconception is that if one ignores anger, denies it, or does not pay attention to it, anger will dissipate and disappear. This denial is in fact an attempt to suppress the anger. This approach is not effective because it can cause deeper long-term ailments.

According to research on adolescents reported by MassGeneral Hospital for Children (n.d.), anger does not necessarily correlate with high blood pressure, but suppressed anger does. Suppressed anger can also manifest as stress or depression.

In addition, according to Mayo Clinic psychiatrist Daniel K. Hall-Flavin (2009), unexpressed anger or resentment can show up as passive-aggressive behavior. A person either is not aware of the anger or doesn't feel safe in expressing it.

Passive-aggressive behavior can lead to a personality style that is excessively cynical, pessimistic, and critical. These core personality adaptations can cause difficulty in making and sustaining long-term relationships as an adult.

Calming. Calming techniques can be effective in dealing with anger. One such technique is to sit or



lie in a cool, dark, quiet room while flexing and relaxing different muscle groups. You begin with the feet and work up the body toward the head while taking slow, deep breaths. You can also count to 10 backward. While breathing, you imagine going into a deeper and more relaxed state.

Some people find it more helpful to listen to audio tapes or compact disks that focus on relaxation techniques. Some choose to participate in yoga or another organized form of meditation. Some write about their feelings and the situation in a journal.

Calming is different from suppression in that a person is aware of the anger, acknowledges it, and acts deliberately to diffuse it. By contrast, a person who suppresses anger is not fully aware of the feeling and may act in a way that blocks it from consciousness, such as by binge eating or drinking.

Often calming can be a personal timeout, a way to get ready for thinking through a situation and figuring out how to express the anger.

Expression. The healthiest way to deal with anger is to express it appropriately. Typically, this is done with “I” statements. For example: “I feel angry when I see mud tracked in on the floor.” This is different from criticizing or blaming someone else by saying: “See what you did! You tracked in mud!”

If no other person is involved, anger may be expressed to a trusted friend. Instead of throwing blocks, for example, Johnny could have expressed his anger to the teacher. Ideally, the teacher would listen and acknowledge the feeling without judging. Comments like “You shouldn’t get angry” can worsen the situation.

Venting doesn’t work

One of the most common misconceptions about handling anger is that a person can work through it by venting—that is, by physically assaulting an inanimate object, such as a pillow. This approach is so deeply imbedded and widespread that it has been incorporated into self-help programs, psychological counseling, and parenting education.

Actually, such strategies “are probably ineffective and may do harm” (Lohr and Olatunji 2007). Many studies dating from the late 1950s to the present reveal that venting can actually feed hostile feelings and intensify aggressive behavior.

Yes, some people may report that venting makes them feel better. But many kinds of unhealthy behaviors result in good feelings. Pigging out on chocolate-covered doughnuts, for example, feels good for a while but is bad for the body. With venting, “emotional improvement is short lived and doesn’t translate into less aggression but more.” Indeed, the enjoyment that follows venting “is likely to reinforce subsequent venting and violence” (Lohr and Olatunji 2007).

With children, this ineffective technique can backfire. Teaching children to hit things could easily lead them to generalize from inanimate objects to living animals or people.

Source: Lohr, Jeffrey M. and Bunmi O. Olatunji. 2007. The psychology of anger venting and empirically supported alternatives that do no harm. *The Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*, 5 (1), 53-63.



Before expressing anger, many people, including children, need time to think through what to say. The goal is to avoid saying something that will raise tension and cause regret. It helps to focus on solutions rather than on the inflaming incident. Some people like to inject a little humor, as long as it's not sarcastic or belittling.

Helping children deal with emotions

Teaching children to deal effectively with their emotions is a complex task that changes as developmental needs change. Toddlers, for example, often display anger or have tantrums when they test the limits of behavior. They learn acceptable behavior as a result of adults consistently enforcing boundaries (Texas Child Care 2009).

Actually, much of the learning in early childhood is about self-regulating the emotions. One effective technique is to help a child acknowledge the emotion and name it: "Mandy, you're banging the table. It looks like you're angry." The next step is to either redirect the behavior or offer comfort in the form of compassion: "Everyone gets angry now and then. I know it's frustrating. Let's clear off the table so you can play with clay." The goal is that children internalize this regulation so they develop the ability to self-regulate.

As children grow emotionally through developmental stages, it's not unusual for them to get angry because they feel helpless, and anger is the natural response. In addition to feeling helpless, children may feel embarrassed, isolated, lonely, anxious, or

hurt. All of these feelings can emerge out of frustrations, which appear as anger in a child.

Therefore, when guiding children who get angry, it's important to discover the underlying cause. Talking through the frustration may take patience and perseverance and can depend on a child's developmental stage. Even school-age children may not have the vocabulary or patience to expound on their feelings in detail.

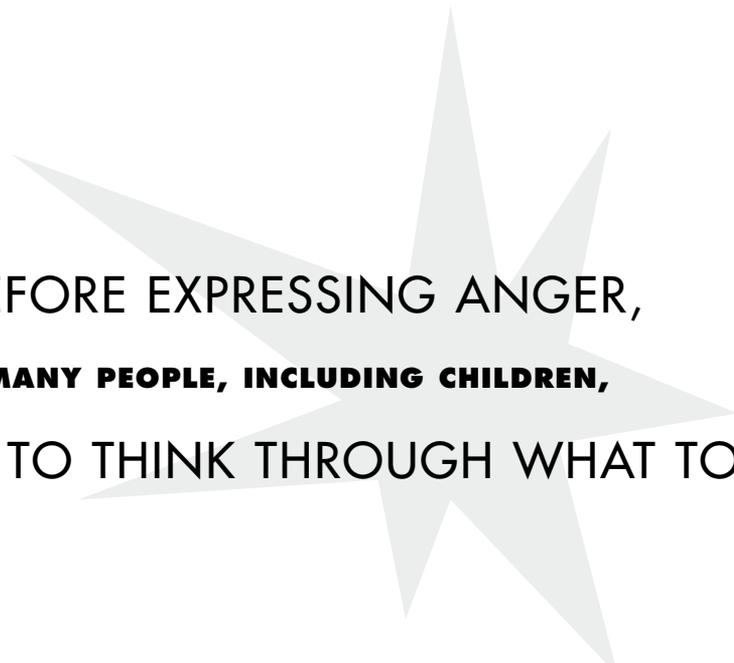
In addition, there may be confounding factors in the child's home. In some families, for example, parents may not understand that there are more effective guidance techniques than hitting. If parents were hit as children, they are likely to carry forward that behavior by hitting their children. Teachers can refer parents to parenting education classes in the community or school district or offer parent meetings on the topic.

Teaching children about anger

Besides helping identify and express emotions, teachers can deepen children's cognitive awareness of their feelings and actions. Some suggestions:

Ask specific, rather than general, questions. Asking open-ended questions encourages a child to think beyond a yes-no response. But children need to learn to process information on a deeper level.

For example, instead of asking a child "How do you feel today?" a teacher might say, "Tell me one thing that went well at school (or home) this morning and one thing that didn't go well." This request for specific information causes the child to think more



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deeply about what happened and distinguish between positive and negative events. Keeping an open line of communication with children in regard to their anger is an important element in this process.

Distinguish between *anger* and *aggression*. Anger is an acceptable and healthy emotion, but aggression is not an acceptable method of expressing one's anger. For example, if Caroline gets mad and hits or attempts to hit Kenisha, Caroline needs to learn that getting angry is OK, but hitting is aggression and not OK. In effect, Caroline needs help in reassessing her actions.

In this case, the teacher can remind Caroline about the classroom rule of treating others with kindness and state the consequence for breaking the rule. A logical consequence might be to remove Caroline from the setting, as in a timeout. A timeout helps Caroline regain control of her feelings, but it does not teach an alternative method of handling her anger.

One alternative method is problem solving. The teacher can ask what the problem was and how both children felt. "I can tell when I'm getting angry because my face feels hot and my heart beats faster. Did you feel anything like that when you got angry just now?"

The teacher can then involve the two children in brainstorming: "What else could you have done?" Choices might include "Using words instead of hitting," "Telling the teacher," and "Finding someone else to play with." Children do best when given different choices in expressing their emotions.

Model appropriate behavior. A most effective technique for how to appropriately process and express one's anger is modeling. This method provides children with a road map. Obviously it requires the teacher and other adults to demonstrate this skill. One must remain calm, be able to modulate or tone down, and gain internal control.

This is easier said than done. Life events, both personal and professional, arise throughout the day and cause frustration. A teacher must be able to identify and transform these issues quickly and not let these emotions boil over into the teaching role.

In some situations, a child's inappropriate response to anger can trigger a bad experience in the teacher's past. For example, Becky throws a temper tantrum in a public environment, such as on the playground or in front of other staff. The teacher or caregiver may become embarrassed, which hinders the opportunity to effectively extinguish Becky's behavior or teach an alternative method of appropriately expressing anger.

Another example: Caroline's attempt to hit another child may bring up a memory of a past incident when the teacher struck out in anger and received negative consequences. Remembering that incident causes the teacher to overreact to Caroline's behavior. Children give adults an abundance of opportunities to re-experience old wounds that have been long forgotten. In such situations, teachers need to differentiate between their own issues with anger and a child's.

It's important to understand that adults don't have to be perfect to model appropriate behavior in

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response to anger. If a teacher can model appropriate behavior most of the time, children will have adequate examples of appropriate and inappropriate methods of dealing with anger, and the choice of deciding which method is most effective and efficient.

In addition to distinguishing between past events and present behavior, teachers need to understand that an issue that does not trigger their anger one day may cause considerable anger another day. For example, a headache can make a person more susceptible to anger than when feeling well. In this case, a teacher can detach from her emotions long enough to briefly explain to a child what emotional or mental state she's experiencing and if necessary ask for a

temporary reprieve. But it's crucial to check back in with the child at a later time, so that the request is seen as honest and dependable.

Use analogies in teaching. An *analogy* is a similarity or comparison between two dissimilar things. One common analogy is referring to a computer's central processing unit (CPU) as its "brain."

In teaching children about anger, a teacher might use this analogy: "Imagine you have a large burlap bag as you go through the day. In the morning when you wake up, the bag is empty. As you go through the day and someone makes you angry, you put a rock in the bag. If you keep adding rocks, what will the bag be like at the end of the day? Heavy, right?" This analogy illustrates the fact that when we don't address our anger, it can (and will) increase.

After explaining this analogy, the teacher could offer instructions on effective ways to stay aware of situations or issues that cause a child to be angry. At the end of the day, the teacher reviews the situations that made the child angry and brainstorms effective methods of discharging anger.

Teaching requires patience

It's important to help the child distinguish between which situations would be suitable for verbally addressing anger with the person who prompted it and which situations would not. It wouldn't be wise to verbally address a bully during free time at school, for example. In that case, the teacher can suggest that the child walk away and seek other resources.





In some cases, a teacher could ask the child to write about the different situations that cause anger and brainstorm different methods of effectively coping with it. For preschoolers and toddlers, art therapy such as painting or working with clay are useful tools for evoking feelings.

ANGER IS AN ACCEPTABLE AND HEALTHY EMOTION.

Teaching children to deal with their anger requires abundant patience by both the teacher and children. There is no single perfect model for teaching effective anger management techniques.

Being an effective teacher requires one to fit within a broad spectrum of “goodness of fit,” which provides lots of room for mistakes. It’s also important to remember that kids are resilient and that we are all human.

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