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**FEATURE**

# Help children manage anger

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Sensing the restlessness of her 4-year-olds, Ms. Johnson peers out the window as the cold wind whips the trees and the rain drenches the playground.

Wham! She turns to see puzzle pieces knocked to the floor and Jeremy pushing Craig. "It's not your turn," Jeremy yells.

She scurries to the two boys, ready to prevent any more aggression from Jeremy and to stave off retaliation from Craig.

"Let's take a deep breath," she says, allowing their tempers to cool. "Then we'll pick up the puzzle and talk about what happened."



Most teachers have dealt with angry outbursts in preschool children. Things can be going along just fine, and suddenly an angry situation erupts, frightening other children and frustrating a teacher working diligently to pursue curriculum goals.



Developmentally, children ages 3 to 5 are beginning to understand their emotions but have little or no control over them. While they may have outgrown the toddler temper tantrum, they still can get angry and react in an instant.

## What makes children angry?

One of the most common causes of a child's anger is conflict over possessions. If Cassie snatches a doll from Naomi, for example, Naomi may resist by saying, "That's mine. Give it back!" Another child might sulk or cry in anger but do nothing about getting the doll back.

Another common cause is physical assault. Taylor gets angry when Kendall playfully, but vigorously, slaps her on the back with a hearty "Gotcha!" She falls down, screaming, and slaps back at Kendall who is trying to help her get up.

In both examples, anger arises when a child is blocked from a goal. Naomi wants to continue playing with the doll, and Taylor wants to be free to play in her own way without threats or harm.

Preschoolers are likely to express anger more often than older children, who typically have learned more self-control. Moreover, boys tend to use physical aggression more readily than girls because girls tend to model the relational aggression that is consistent with gender roles.

Children learn to express anger according to what they have experienced at home and what they have seen on TV, movies, and videos. Children may witness an angry interaction between their parents, for example, and think that behavior is appropriate. In some cases, a child may be assaulted directly by an angry family member or friend.

Similarly, children may see athletes on TV who get into a fight because of a conflict with another athlete or a referee. Such behavior may make children think

angry behavior is all right, especially if an adult watching the same game yells, “Bad call! Slug the (expletive).”

Poor anger control can lead to behavior problems as children grow into teenagers and adults, potentially hampering school performance, employment, and relationships. As teachers, we can help children learn to manage anger in healthy and productive ways.

## How to help children

Your classroom can be an ideal setting for learning anger management, despite what children have learned in other settings. Observe how children get angry so that over time you can anticipate when and where conflicts are likely to occur. Arrange the classroom with learning centers that are compatible and stock them with appropriate and adequate learning materials. Set a few simple classroom rules, such as “We treat everyone with kindness and respect,” to give children boundaries for acceptable behavior.

Because healthy social-emotional development is fundamental to the preschool curriculum, identify and name emotions as part of routines and learning activities. Reading books and stories on the topic, for example, can help children understand that they are not the only ones who get angry, and they can deal with their feelings in a healthy and assertive way.

Encourage children to reflect on the story and help them describe their interpretations of actions. Guide the conversation with questions like these: What

happened and why? What things have made you angry in the past? How might you handle angry feelings in the future?

When selecting books, look for ones that treat anger as a normal emotion, identify a specific event that caused the anger, and show how to manage anger without hurting oneself or others or damaging property. (See the children’s books below.)

Because children learn best from experience, it’s important to label all emotions, not just anger: “Sally is feeling sad because her kitty-cat has not come home.” “Billy is excited about having a new baby sister.” “Josh is angry because Maricela took the truck he was playing with.”

## ANGER ARISES WHEN CHILDREN ARE BLOCKED FROM A GOAL.

When an angry outburst occurs, it’s useless to talk to children while they’re feeling tense and hostile. A more effective technique is to give children time to calm down, as Ms. Johnson did above. You can also redirect an angry child to a different and calming activity, such as rolling clay or playing at the water table.

When children have calmed down, explain that emotions are natural and normal responses to events in our lives. Anger, in particular, can occur at those times when things don’t go our way. Depending on the circumstance, we may feel a little angry or a lot. Finding no more red beads in the sewing basket may make you feel mildly irritated, for example, while losing your backpack may make you really upset.

Perhaps the most important thing for children to learn is that feeling angry is OK, but acting angry is not. Acting angry can mean saying hurtful things, hurting someone by hitting or biting, or damaging property (throwing a rock at a window, for example).

Instead, teach children to use words to explain their feelings and state what they want: “Jeremy, tell Craig you felt angry when he played out of turn.” Invite children to think of options for solving their conflict. “Cassie and Naomi, how can you both play with this doll?” Model this behavior yourself: “I get

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so angry when this computer doesn't work." Deep breath. "I'll try using the search function on my phone instead."

Observe how children respond to your efforts. Lucy may help wipe up spilled water when you ask her because she recognizes your authority. But she may resent and refuse the request from a playmate. Anger may surface later as criticism or acting out. Remember that children are vulnerable and respond best in a relationship of love and trust.

The goal is to help children learn self-control, not feel humiliated or rejected. Remind the angry child who acts aggressively that "Everyone makes mistakes." Take a sulking or pouting child aside: "It seems like (situation) made you angry. Want to talk about it?" As children learn more self-control, such as using words to express feelings, celebrate the new behavior, even the small steps in a positive direction.

Sometimes talking doesn't work. "My big brother accidentally spilled ink on my San Antonio Spurs T-shirt, and now it won't come out." The brother expresses regrets, but the damage cannot be undone, and the child still feels angry. In that case, the child may need to cry, rest, or spend time alone until the angry feeling subsides. Remind children that they may need help in figuring out their feelings. Often talking to an adult and listening can help.

## When anger hits overdrive

If a child's outbursts are frequent or last more than a few minutes, consider encouraging the family to consult a physician or counselor. Offer to document the timing and causes of the anger overloads as well as the child's other behaviors. Is the child polite and playful during most of the day? Does the child act impulsively, seem depressed, or hurt others? How does the child respond to guidance techniques such as distraction?

A description of a child's behavior can help a mental health professional diagnose an underlying problem and suggest strategies for teachers and parents to help the child gain self-control.

## Practice and patience

Be aware that it takes time and practice for children to learn how to manage anger and for you as a teacher to guide children in an appropriate way.

Involve parents in the process. Use a parent-teacher conference to discuss a child's behavior and

express your concerns. Educate parents in how children learn aggressive behavior and what you are doing in the classroom. Consider inviting a child psychologist to talk about anger management at the next parents meeting, or ask if the parent would be interested in receiving an email with a list of websites on the topic.

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## THE GOAL IS TO HELP CHILDREN LEARN SELF-CONTROL.

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You may not see immediate results, but rest assured that helping children know what anger looks like can go a long way toward helping them manage it.

### Books for children

- Bang, Molly. 1999. *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really Really Angry*. New York: Blue Sky Press/Scholastic.
- Kaiser, Cecily. 2004. *If You're Angry and You Know It*. New York: Scholastic.
- Sendak, Maurice. 1984. *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Spelman, Cornelia Maude. 2000. *When I Feel Angry*. Morton Grove, Ill.: Albert Whitman & Co.
- Viorst, Judith. 1987. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. New York: Atheneum Books.

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- Gottlieb, David. Anger overload in children: Diagnostic and treatment issues. Great Kids, [www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/anger-overload/](http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/anger-overload/), accessed Nov. 14, 2015.
- Marion, Marian, n.d. Helping Young Children Manage the Strong Emotion of Anger. *Early Childhood News*. [www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article\\_view.aspx?ArticleID=449](http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=449). Accessed Nov. 14, 2015. ■