

Helping Young Children Deal with Anger

by Marian Marion, PhD

Children's anger presents challenges to teachers committed to constructive, ethical, and effective child guidance. This digest explores what we know about the components of children's anger, factors contributing to understanding and managing anger, and the ways teachers can guide children's expressions of anger.

Three Components of Anger

Anger is believed to have three components (Lewis & Michalson, 1983):

The Emotional State of Anger. The first component is the emotion itself, defined as an affective or arousal state, or a feeling experienced when a goal is blocked or needs are frustrated. Fabes and Eisenberg (1992) describe several types of stress-producing anger provocations that young children face daily in classroom interactions:

- Conflict over possessions, which involves someone taking children's property or invading their space.
- Physical assault, which involves one child doing something to another child, such as pushing or hitting.
- Verbal conflict, for example, a tease or a taunt.
- Rejection, which involves a child being ignored or not allowed to play with peers.
- Issues of compliance, which often involve asking or insisting that children do something that they do not want to do--for instance, wash their hands.

Expression of Anger. The second component of anger is its expression. Some children vent or express anger through facial expressions, crying, sulking, or talking, but do little to try to solve a problem or confront the provocateur. Others actively resist by physically or verbally defending their positions, self-esteem, or possessions in nonaggressive ways. Still other children express anger with aggressive revenge by physically or verbally retaliating against the provocateur. Some children express dislike by telling the offender that he or she cannot play or is not liked. Other children express anger through avoidance or attempts to escape from or evade the provocateur. And some children use adult seeking, looking for comfort or solutions from a teacher, or telling the teacher about an incident.

Teachers can use child guidance strategies to help children express angry feelings in socially constructive ways. Children develop ideas about how to express emotions (Michalson & Lewis, 1985; Russel, 1989) primarily through social interaction in their families and later by watching television or movies, playing

video games, and reading books (Honig & Wittmer, 1992). Some children have learned a negative, aggressive approach to expressing anger (Cummings, 1987; Hennessy et al., 1994) and, when confronted with everyday anger conflicts, resort to using aggression in the classroom (Huesmann, 1988). A major challenge for early childhood teachers is to encourage children to acknowledge angry feelings and to help them learn to express anger in positive and effective ways.

An Understanding of Anger. The third component of the anger experience is understanding--interpreting and evaluating--the emotion. Because the ability to regulate the expression of anger is linked to an understanding of the emotion (Zeman & Shipman, 1996), and because children's ability to reflect on their anger is somewhat limited, children need guidance from teachers and parents in understanding and managing their feelings of anger.

Understanding and Managing Anger

The development of basic cognitive processes undergirds children's gradual development of the understanding of anger (Lewis & Saarni, 1985).

Memory. Memory improves substantially during early childhood (Perlmutter, 1986), enabling young children to better remember aspects of anger-arousing interactions. Children who have developed unhelpful ideas of how to express anger (Miller & Sperry, 1987) may retrieve the early unhelpful strategy even after teachers help them gain a more helpful perspective. This finding implies that teachers may have to remind some children, sometimes more than once or twice, about the less aggressive ways of expressing anger.

Language. Talking about emotions helps young children understand their feelings (Brown & Dunn, 1996). The understanding of emotion in preschool children is predicted by overall language ability (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994). Teachers can expect individual differences in the ability to identify and label angry feelings because children's families model a variety of approaches in talking about emotions.

Self-Referential and Self-Regulatory Behaviors. Self-referential behaviors include viewing the self as separate from others and as an active, independent, causal agent. Self-regulation refers to controlling impulses, tolerating frustration, and postponing immediate gratification. Initial self-regulation in young children provides a base for early childhood teachers who can develop strategies to nurture children's emerging ability to regulate the expression of anger. [This may be particularly problematic if a child has been diagnosed with a disorder such as ADHD or ODD.]

Sidebar: There appears to be a link between ADHD and bullying. A 2008 study conducted in Sweden, showed that children with ADHD are four times more likely than their peers to bully other children, and they are almost ten times as likely than other children to be bullied.

Guiding Children's Expressions of Anger

Teachers can help children deal with anger by guiding their understanding and management of this emotion. The practices described here can help children understand and manage angry feelings in a direct and nonaggressive way.

Create a Safe Emotional Climate. A healthy early childhood setting permits children to acknowledge all feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, and does not shame anger. Healthy classroom systems have clear, firm, and flexible boundaries.

Model Responsible Anger Management. Children have an impaired ability to understand emotion when adults show a lot of anger (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994). Adults who are most effective in helping children manage anger model responsible management by acknowledging, accepting, and taking responsibility for their own angry feelings and by expressing anger in direct and nonaggressive ways.

Help Children Develop Self-Regulatory Skills. Teachers of infants and toddlers do a lot of self-regulation "work," realizing that the children in their care have a very limited ability to regulate their own emotions. As children get older, adults can gradually transfer control of the self to children, so that they can develop self-regulatory skills.

Encourage Children to Label Feelings of Anger. Teachers and parents can help young children produce a label for their anger by teaching them that they are having a feeling and that they can use a word to describe their angry feeling. A permanent record (a book or chart) can be made of lists of labels for anger (e.g., mad, irritated, annoyed), and the class can refer to it when discussing angry feelings.

Encourage Children to Talk About Anger-Arousing Interactions. Preschool children better understand anger and other emotions when adults explain emotions (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994). When children are embroiled in an anger-arousing interaction, teachers can help by listening without judging, evaluating, or ordering them to feel differently.

Use Books and Stories about Anger to Help Children Understand and Manage Anger. Well-presented stories about anger and other emotions validate children's feelings and give information about anger (Jalongo, 1986; Marion, 1995). It is important to preview all books about anger because some stories teach irresponsible anger management.

Communicate with Parents. Some of the same strategies employed to talk with parents about other areas of the curriculum can be used to enlist their assistance in helping children learn to express emotions. For example, articles about learning to use words to label anger can be included in a newsletter to parents.

Children guided toward responsible anger management are more likely to understand and manage angry feelings directly and non aggressively and to avoid the stress often accompanying poor anger management (Eisenberg et al., 1991). Teachers can take some of the bumps out of understanding and managing anger by adopting positive guidance strategies.

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Children respond with anger because they feel helpless. To understand why one child becomes more angry than other children takes some time and effort. What triggered the outburst? The thing to realize is that our anger is generally a reaction to frustration. Dealing with a child's anger requires first finding out what they feel. Ask them what happened, what went wrong, or why they are feeling what they feel. They may be able to tell you very clearly. Teaching your young child to manage anger and talk about feelings can prevent many angry outbursts in teenage years ahead, in their adult relationships, and in their own relationships with their children. [Page with Comments](#). [Pingback: Proven Techniques to Help Your Kid Get Control of Anger](#). Learn more about anger management for kids. We offer tips on explosive behavior in children and explain how to deal with anger. But what about older children and even younger kids who are so dangerous to themselves and others, behavioral techniques aren't enough to keep them, and others around them, safe? Medication. Medication for underlying conditions such as ADHD and anxiety may make your child more reachable and teachable. Children with extreme behaviors may need to spend time in a residential treatment facility, sometimes, but not always, in a hospital setting. There, they receive behavioral and, most likely, pharmaceutical treatment. Therapeutic boarding schools provide consistency and structure round the clock, seven days a week. When children and young people act irrationally, they don't always understand your reasoning, and this can be when difficult situations escalate and get out of hand. Keep explanations calm and simple to avoid misunderstandings. Don't mirror the anger. Keep a calm manner, neutral voice and open body language (no folded arms). Dealing with aggression and violence. When a child or young person is very angry, they can get verbally or physically aggressive and even violent. It can be hard to help them, especially when they say there is nothing wrong and that everyone else has the problem. If safe to do so for you and the child remove yourself from the room. Developmental disorders and anger. Young people with developmental issues may struggle to manage angry feelings. It's easier to deal with children's anger if we get rid of this notion. Our goal is not to repress or destroy angry feelings in children or in ourselves but rather to accept the emotions and to help channel and direct them to constructive ends. Parents and teachers are encouraged to allow children to experience all of their feelings. Help the child understand the cause of a stressed situation. We often fail to realize how quickly young children can begin to behave appropriately once they understand the cause of their frustration. Use physical restraint. Occasionally a child may lose control so completely that he has to be physically restrained or removed from the scene to prevent him from hurting himself or others. reinforcing when children remain. [Helping Young Children Control Anger](#). and [Handle Disappointment](#). calm; and involving parents and other. in child rearing practices specific to. teaching children how to deal with. frustration and anger, it is essential. for teachers to establish effective.