



THE MEDICINE CHEST

Helping Young Children Manage Anger

When it comes to difficult behaviors in young children, anger and aggression can be especially challenging in childcare. These behaviors can have powerful effects on both children and adults, and they can be the most frustrating and disruptive encounters you have in childcare.

Anger in Children

Anger is a normal part of life. It is a natural adaptive response to threatening or aggravating situations, and it can signal that something is wrong or needs changing. The causes of anger are similar for adults and children. They include frustration, disappointment, and annoyance, as well as feeling hurt, harassed, or threatened. For children, frustration is an especially common culprit. Because they have not yet developed positive ways to handle anger, their responses are often physical and disruptive.

Anger involves both emotional and physical reactions. Stress causes a “fight or flight” response in situations. When you feel angry or stressed you might “fight” (or fight back). For the young child, this may include hitting, biting, or kicking. Or, if you do not fight, you take “flight” and withdraw, backing away or internalizing your response. A child who becomes quiet, withdrawn and, over time, perhaps even depressed might be taking flight.

Aggression is an action, often intentional, that can result in physical or emotional injury. Deliberate aggression is intended to hurt another person or damage property. Caregivers should understand that aggressive actions in infants and toddlers are not deliberate; rather, they are unintentional. However, hurtful behavior can be intentional in preschool and older children.

Anger is primarily emotional, and its components include feelings and thoughts which can lead to aggressive behaviors. The child physically experiences anger in the way he or she “feels,” including disappointment, irritability, and frustration. She also has thoughts and beliefs about what she is experiencing and has expectations about what is happening.

The child’s behaviors or actions are attempts to gain control of a situation or put things back the way “they should be.” Hitting, kicking, and shouting are all common in the young child who is angry. If left to continue without learning healthy alternatives, these behaviors can escalate, leaving the child feeling confused and even guilty about losing control. Remember, anger is often rooted in the child’s expectations--what she expected did not happen.

Anger is almost always preceded by an event or a behavior that triggers it. For children, the trigger is usually a challenge to his idea of how things should be or an unmet personal need. Common triggers are the actions or reactions of others, difficult or unexpected situations, conflict, disagreement, frustration, certain actions, words, and unpleasant or traumatic memories.

Some children are more prone to anger or frustration due to their personality. If a child has a disability (learning or physical), their level of frustration may be higher making it

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more difficult for them to manage their emotions and impulses.

How Can You Help?

Children can be taught to identify their personal warning signs and triggers of anger, which include feelings, thoughts and actions. Adults can help young children understand that, while they are entitled to feel mad, they must learn to express their anger (and other difficult feelings) in ways that do not hurt themselves or others.

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Teach children how to make “I Feel” statements, using words instead of actions to communicate how they feel. This helps them practice behavior that is less disruptive. For example, three-year-old Tommy can be guided to say, “I want to play with that truck,” rather than yanking the truck away from another child. As children learn to identify the cause of their anger (triggers) and to respond calmly and stay in control, they become more skilled at resolving conflicts as they occur.

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You can teach children some effective self-calming techniques including counting to five and deep breathing. Storytelling, taking a break, using music, and humor also are helpful. The key is to help the young child to gain control over his actions and develop healthy outlets for his feelings and thoughts.

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Children can learn the power of empathy, negotiation, and compromise, which helps them to “see it through the other child’s eyes.” The benefits of learning these skills are lifelong as they help young children stay safe, feel good about themselves, and deal appropriately with strong feelings.

Appropriate Environment

There are a number of ways a caregiver can help children learn how to avoid damaging behavior when they are angry:

Model appropriate anger management behaviors yourself:

- Do not overreact or let your emotions get the best of you. If you fly off the handle when you get angry, then the children in your care will think they should do the same.
- State your feelings when you get angry and frustrated and explain to the children how you are going to handle those feelings, when appropriate.
- Reframe your own responses to children who are aggressive or acting out. Do not get angry or frustrated yourself, and make sure to tell the children you understand that they are angry.

Create an environment where anger is not only understood and dealt with effectively, but less likely to occur:

- Provide a predictable environment that balances structure and limit setting with developmentally-appropriate opportunities for exploration and learning.
- Openly state that it is acceptable for children to deal with their emotions, and expected that they will express emotions when they are feeling them.
- Set up a “Cozy Corner” for the children--a self-soothing zone that they can retreat to on their own when they need a moment or a quiet spot to decompress.

Communicate effectively to both connect with the child and deliver messages that help

them calm down:

- Get on the same level with the child and use friendly eye contact and gentle gestures to draw the child's attention.
- Communicate with a firm but gentle voice; be clear and consistent.
- Empathize with children so they understand that everyone feels angry sometimes, encourage them to move on, and redirect them to productive outlets for their emotions.

Do not just rely on yourself. You may need help from time to time in dealing with these strong behaviors, so seek the advice of a health consultant or early childhood specialist when what you have tried is not working.

Keep in mind that all behavior has meaning. Problem behaviors in young children are likely the result of unmet needs and how young children communicate that something is wrong.

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Internet Resources

Adults and Children Together Against Violence (ACT),
www.actagainstviolence.org/anger/atschool.html

At Health, www.athealth.com/Consumer/issues/childsanger.html

Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP),
ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/ecearchive/digests/1997/marion97.htm

National Network for Child Care, www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc31_cope.anger.html

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