

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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ANGER: HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THIS COMPLEX EMOTION

What is anger?

Anger is a fundamental emotion felt by all people. It is normal and often healthy. When it gets out of control, however, anger can become destructive. In children this can lead to difficulties with family, with peers, and with school performance. Similar to other emotions, anger is accompanied by physiological changes. For example, when you get angry both your heart rate and blood pressure may increase. Anger can be caused by both internal and external events. For example, a child could become angry because he feels that his grades in school are not good enough (internal) or a child could become angry because she was pushed by a sibling (external).

The natural way to express anger is to respond with aggression. It is the instinctive response to believed physical or verbal threats. Responding aggressively in every threatening situation, however, is not healthy or safe. Aggressive acts can lead to social problems, difficulties with family members, troubles with the law, and physical or emotional harm. Therefore, it is important that children, at an early age, are taught effective, healthy ways of controlling their anger.

What does anger look like at different ages?

In early childhood, children begin to master the ability to suppress physically aggressive impulses (pushing, hitting, pinching, biting, yelling) when they are angry. Preschool-aged children are learning to identify basic emotional states in themselves and others with the use of words. However, it is common to see young children resort to physically acting out behaviors (throwing toys, pushing or hitting a parent or peer) as they are still becoming accustomed to using words to express their feelings.

As children age, they develop more sophisticated language skills and begin to be able to take the perspective of others. They develop empathy and are better able to understand the effect their actions and words have on others. By the later elementary grades, children should be able to express angry feelings verbally as opposed to physically. However, children with language difficulties or difficulties controlling impulses frequently struggle with managing angry feelings and may resort to physically acting out, yelling, or refusing to obey school or household rules.

Teenagers have a whole new set of stressors and concerns that may trigger angry, frustrated feelings, including an increased need for independence and privacy, in addition to increased academic, social and work demands. Some teens express frustration and anger by refusing to verbalize feelings and thoughts while others act out physically by throwing objects or slamming doors. A handful of teens will have difficulty managing physically aggressive impulses and their acting out may escalate to the point of aggression towards others. Peer culture can also play a significant role in the acceptance of verbal or physical aggression as an appropriate response to angry feelings.

What can I do as a parent?

How parents respond to emotional situations has a significant effect on how well children learn to cope with their emotions. Children are continually learning self-control and need guidance about how to appropriately express and master their emotions and behaviors. Children who learn positive emotional coping skills, such as anger management, are better able to respond to and bounce back from stress. This ability serves youth throughout childhood and into adulthood and results in improved physical health and academic/work performance. It also decreases behavior problems, while increasing self-control, self-confidence and positive peer relations.

Parents can encourage effective anger management skills in the following ways:

- ❑ Guide the development of empathy. For example, ask your child, “How do you think Sam might feel when you yell at him and grab his toy?” or “How would you feel if Sam did that to you?”
- ❑ Teach children that all feelings are acceptable, but not all behavior is acceptable. For example, it’s alright to feel frustrated, but it’s not alright to hit, kick or grab as a way of expressing that feeling.
- ❑ Every time your child must deal with angry feelings is a teachable moment. If you noticed that your child remained calm during an anger-provoking situation, point out this observation and give him a lot of praise. On the other hand, if you noticed that your child did not handle their anger so well, take the time to help your child problem solve. For example, ask your child what she can do the next time something happens that makes her angry. Help her generate options, such as “tell an adult” or “walk away” and then encourage her to respond in one of these socially appropriate ways the next time.
- ❑ Help your child develop effective stress management habits in an effort to prevent angry outbursts. Ask your child to think of positive activities, such as exercising, reading, writing, or listening to music that will take his mind off what is upsetting him and urge him to regularly engage in these activities. Even better, model the use of these activities yourself!
- ❑ Encourage your child to take a few deep breaths when they are angry, prior to their taking an aggressive action. Keep in mind that deep-breathing is a skill that must be practiced ahead of time to be effective. With younger children it is a skill that parents can easily practice with their child when they put them to bed at night.

When should I seek professional help?

Learning to cope with angry feelings is a regular part of growing up. Some kids develop effective anger management skills easily and others require more direct guidance and practice. If your child is having difficulty learning skills to calm themselves down when they are angry or has regular episodes where they are unable to stop themselves from being physically and/or verbally aggressive, your child may need the intervention of a mental health professional. Frequent angry outbursts may impede a child’s ability to participate in regular classroom activities and raises the risk that someone in their classroom may be physically or emotionally harmed. A mental health professional can evaluate the underlying causes and triggers for your child’s angry and frustrated feelings and can teach your child specialized anger management skills. Mental health professionals can also provide support and guidance to you and your child’s teachers. A handful of children will direct their angry impulses towards themselves and may engage in self-harming behavior (head banging, cutting, suicidal gestures). Children who engage in these behaviors require immediate attention.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8552.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, www.AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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