

Coping with children's anger



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)**

Introduction

Most parents will have to deal with angry children at some time. Indeed, all children go through a phase of showing a lot of bad temper in the pre-school years, and most children grow out of it around four or five years old. Some, however, will go on having angry outbursts as they get older. Of course, even adults get angry at times, but most of us (not all!) have learnt how to handle our anger properly.

This booklet is designed to help you manage anger in your child, and to teach ways of being angry in an acceptable way.

Why do children show so much anger in their early years?

It is important to remember that all children pass through a phase of tempers and anger. Even tiny babies feel rage and can bawl when their desires are thwarted. However, anger starts to increase in the second year when toddlers start to realise:

- That they are separate people with their own wants
- That they can control other people by their actions
- That they can say **no!**

Of course, at this age children have no patience and so:

- They want everything **now.**

For these reasons, and perhaps others too, toddlers can show the fiercest of rages and you are likely to be familiar with the full-blown tantrum - screaming, pounding fists, stamping, and maybe head-banging. By the time the child is about two years old, his anger may start to be more retaliatory: that is, he may try to have revenge on the person he is angry with by hitting, biting, or grabbing. Many parents will know all about this stage!

If a child does not learn how to manage anger by the time he goes to school, he is likely to get into a great deal of trouble. People are usually quite tolerant of angry toddlers, but a screaming, kicking eight year old is a different story!

Ways of handling anger

Parents use many methods to deal with angry children. Some are helpful and some are not! Before going on to look at useful methods, we'll spend some time exploring which techniques are best avoided and why.

Unhelpful methods

- Smacking your child only shows him that 'might is right' and that hitting is OK. It must be very confusing to be told off for being angry and for hitting, then to be hit by an adult. Try to avoid it if you can. In any case, studies have shown that smacking doesn't actually change the child's behaviour - it just squashes it for a bit, then it pops up again later.
- Some adults show a lot of anger towards each other or towards the children, with lots of shouting, swearing, name-calling, and so on. In a house like this, children will just copy what they see the adults doing.
- If you get all hurt and upset, or even furious, when your child shows anger, he may learn to be frightened of the power of his own anger. In a situation like this, some children may hold their anger inside them, and never learn how to express it properly.
- Many parents reward anger in their children, without realising they are doing it. Anything a child (or adult) does which has a good consequence is likely to be repeated. Here is an example: let's say that John wants the toy car that Mary is playing with, and starts to scream and hits her when she won't give him it. You might:
 1. take it off Mary and let John have it
 2. give John a biscuit as a 'consolation' prize
 3. Mary might cry when John hits her and she might give him the car.

All of these three outcomes would reward John for being aggressive, and all should be avoided! Perhaps you can think of other similar outcomes which give everyone a bit of peace and quiet at the time but actually 'teach' children that angry outbursts are worth having because they get rewarded.

Helpful methods

Having looked at strategies which are not helpful, we can now look at more effective ways of managing anger. One of the first things you can try is:

1) Avoid situations which you know will lead to trouble. Obviously, you can't avoid them all, nor would it be wise to do so - because children need to learn how to get their needs and wants met properly - but at least you can cut down on some of the 'danger' times. Here are some common ones:

- The half hour before teatime is often a danger time for tantrums when your child is tired and hungry. Would an earlier teatime help? What about having a quiet and peaceful game then, or a story while the potatoes are cooking?
- Arriving home from an outing, playgroup or nursery is often a difficult time. Children can be tired, or maybe annoyed at having to leave an exciting activity or friends. Try to have some calm activity available and be ready to give extra attention at this time. However, don't be tempted to meet your child at nursery or school with sweets or drinks every day, or you will surely get trouble on the days when you don't do it. Give treats some days and not others.
- After you have been apart from your child for a while, he can be angry and demanding. Try to spend time telling each other about what you have been doing, and try not to expect too much of him at this time.
- Having guests in your house can be a difficult time for tempers, especially if the child feels left out of things. Make sure he is noticed too. Provide an interesting, quiet activity for him to do nearby and praise him often for playing quietly.

2) Show by example how you deal with anger.

So:

- Don't lose control yourself

- Tell your child when you are angry, and why. Say it in simple words (e.g. I'm feeling angry because the gas man didn't fix the cooker properly, so now I can't cook the tea)
- Think 'out loud' about how you are going to put things right so your child sees problem-solving in action ('I'm feeling so angry, that I'm just going to sit down for a minute to calm down. Then I'm going to make myself a cup of tea and think what is best to do. Perhaps I'll . . .')

3) Distract a child who is in the early stages of a temper outburst. You could do this by:

- Asking questions about something else: ('Did you finish that model? Well done!' – or: 'Oh, have you finished that jigsaw? How clever, let me come and look.')
 - Chattering on about what you are doing: ('You want a biscuit? Well, first we're going to pop out to the shops. Now, where's the shopping bag? Oh there it is! Now, coat on! Can you see the dog out the window there? A big black one! That's right, and now shoes...' (and on and on and on...))
 - Getting the child to help you with something: ('I'm just finishing the washing up first. Could you help me dry up? Here's a chair for you to stand on.')
- Be careful, however, not to distract a child by providing an exciting toy or activity as this could reward him for getting angry.

4) Humour can sometimes be used to defuse an angry outburst, although it doesn't always work. It could make a child even more furious! It's worth a try, though. Try:

- 'Is that the loudest you can scream? See if you can make it loud enough for the man in the moon to hear. Louder!'
- 'Careful, you'll shake the house down!'
- Try tickling.

5) Reward your child's attempts to wait, to share, to take turns, and to tolerate frustration. Try to notice any signs of these and make a point of telling your child how pleased you are. Sometimes, you might even give an unexpected small reward to your child for managing his anger so well.

6) Warn a child, if temper seems to be getting out of hand, that you will take action if it doesn't stop. Carry this through. Think of a small punishment you could use. Here are some examples:

- 'If you don't stop screaming, we will not go to the park after all.'
- 'If you go on stamping like that, you will have to go to your room for five minutes.'
- 'If you keep on shouting, there will be no pudding for you.'

7) Removing attention is a useful technique, particularly if a temper outburst seems to be designed for an audience. Some tempers are just sheer frustration, but others are performed for dramatic effect. If you are treated to one of these, the best way to handle it is to remove the audience.

So:

- Take yourself off to another room and ignore what's going on.
- Move the child to another room. He'll probably follow you out and you'll have to keep moving him away.
- Have a 'time out' place where your child is put when he has a tantrum. This should be a boring place where he has to stay for five minutes (no longer) - it could be a chair facing a wall, sitting on the stairs, standing in the hall, etc.

Without an audience, the temper should die down.

8) Holding your child is something you could try when all else fails. It is quite difficult to hold a wriggling, shouting child until he has calmed down, and may take a lot of strength, patience and tough shins! Have the child facing away from you so that he is not getting too much attention from you. Don't embark on this unless you are determined to see it through. Don't be rough - just hold your child quietly but firmly until the temper passes.

Finally

This booklet has covered some ways of managing children's tempers. Some of them will prove beneficial to you, although you might have to experiment with the different ideas to see what works best for you. If you need further help, ask the person who gave you this booklet.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

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