

# Dealing with the Angry Child

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Handling children's anger can be puzzling, draining, and distressing for adults. In fact, one of the major problems in dealing with anger in children is the angry feelings that are often stirred up in us. It has been said that we as parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators need to remind ourselves that we were not always taught how to deal with anger as a fact of life during our own childhood. We were led to believe that to be angry was to be bad, and we were often made to feel guilty for expressing anger.

It will be 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 feelings and to help channel and direct them to constructive ends.

Parents and teachers must allow children to feel all their feelings. Adult skills can then be directed toward showing children acceptable ways of expressing their feelings. Strong feelings cannot be denied, and angry outbursts should not always be viewed as a sign of serious problems; they should be recognized and treated with respect.

To respond effectively to overly aggressive behavior in children we need to have some ideas about what may have triggered an outburst. Anger may be a defense to avoid painful feelings; it may be associated with failure, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation; or it may be related to anxiety about situations over which the child has no control.

Angry defiance may also be associated with feelings of dependency, and anger may be associated with sadness and depression. In childhood, anger and sadness are very close to one another, and it is important to remember that much of what an adult experiences as sadness is expressed by a child as anger.

Before we look at specific ways to manage aggressive and angry outbursts, several points should be highlighted:

- We should distinguish between anger and aggression. Anger is a temporary emotional state caused by frustration; aggression is often an attempt to hurt a person or to destroy property.

- Anger and aggression do not have to be dirty words. In other words, in looking at aggressive behavior in children, we must be careful to distinguish between behavior that indicates emotional problems and behavior that is normal.
- In dealing with angry children, our actions should be motivated by the need to protect and to reach, not by a desire to punish. Parents and teachers should show a child that they accept his or her feelings, while suggesting other ways to express the feelings. An adult might say, for example, "Let me tell you what some children would do in a situation like this..." It is not enough to tell children what behaviors we find unacceptable. We must teach them acceptable ways of coping. Also, ways must be found to communicate what we expect of them. Contrary to popular opinion, punishment is not the most effective way to communicate to children what we expect of them.

## Responding to the Angry Child

Some of the following suggestions for dealing with the angry child were taken from *The Aggressive Child* by Fritz Redl and David Wineman. They should be considered helpful ideas and not be seen as a "bag of tricks."

***Catch the child being good.*** Tell the child what behaviors please you. Respond to positive efforts and reinforce good behavior. An observing and sensitive parent will find countless opportunities during the day to make such comments as "I like the way you come in for dinner without being reminded"; "I appreciate your hanging up your clothes even though you were in a hurry to get out to play"; "You were really patient while I was on the phone"; "I'm glad you shared your snack with your sister"; "I like the way you're able to think of others"; and "Thank you for telling the truth about what really happened."

Similarly, teachers can positively reinforce good behavior with statements like "I know it was difficult for you to wait your turn, and I'm pleased that you could do it"; "Thanks for sitting in your seat quietly"; "You were thoughtful in offering to help Johnny with his spelling"; "You worked hard on that project, and I admire your effort."

***Deliberately ignore inappropriate behavior that can be tolerated.*** This doesn't mean that you should ignore the child, just the behavior. The "ignoring" has to be planned and consistent. Even though this behavior may be tolerated, the child must recognize that it is inappropriate.

***Provide physical outlets and other alternatives.*** It is important for children to have opportunities for physical exercise and movement, both at home and at school.

***Manipulate the surroundings.*** Aggressive behavior can be encouraged by placing children in tough, tempting situations. We should try to plan the surroundings so that certain things are less apt to happen. Stop a "problem" activity and substitute, temporarily, a more desirable one. Sometimes rules and regulations, as well as physical space, may be too confining.

***Use closeness and touching.*** Move physically closer to the child to curb his or her angry impulse. Young children are often calmed by having an adult come close by and express interest in the child's activities. Children naturally try to involve adults in what they are doing, and the adult is often annoyed at being bothered. Very young children (and children who are emotionally deprived) seem to need much more adult involvement in their interests. A child about to use a toy or tool in a destructive way is sometimes easily stopped by an adult who expresses interest in having it shown to him. An outburst from an older child struggling with a difficult reading selection can be prevented by a caring adult who moves near the child to say, "Show me which words are giving you trouble."

***Be ready to show affection.*** Sometimes all that is needed for any angry child to regain control is a sudden hug or other impulsive show of affection. Children with serious emotional problems, however, may have trouble accepting affection.

***Ease tension through humor.*** Kidding the child out of a temper tantrum or outburst offers the child an opportunity to "save face." However, it is important to distinguish between face-saving humor and sarcasm, teasing, or ridicule.

***Appeal directly to the child.*** Tell him or her how you feel and ask for consideration. For example, a parent or a teacher may gain a child's cooperation by saying, "I know that noise you're making doesn't usually bother me, but today I've got a headache, so could you find something else you'd enjoy doing?"

***Explain situations.*** Help the child understand the cause of a stressed situation. We often fail to realize how easily young children can begin to react properly 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. This may also "save face" for the child. Physical restraint or removal from the scene should not be viewed by the child as punishment but as a means of saying, "You can't do that." In such situations, an adult cannot afford to lose his or her temper and unfriendly remarks by other children should not be tolerated.

***Encourage children to see their strengths as well as their weaknesses.*** Help them to see that they can reach their goals.

***Use promises and rewards.*** Promises of future pleasure can be used both to start and to stop behavior. This approach should not be compared with bribery. We must know what the child likes--what brings him pleasure--and we must deliver on our promises.

***Say "NO!"*** Limits should be clearly explained and enforced. Children should be free to function within those limits.

***Tell the child that you accept his or her angry feelings, but offer other suggestions for expressing them.*** Teach children to put their angry feelings into words, rather than fists.

***Build a positive self-image.*** Encourage children to see themselves as valued and valuable people.

***Use punishment cautiously.*** There is a fine line between punishment that is hostile toward a child and punishment that is educational.

***Model appropriate behavior.*** Parents and teachers should be aware of the powerful influence of their actions on a child's or group's behavior.

***Teach children to express themselves verbally.*** Talking helps a child have control and thus reduces acting out behavior. Encourage the child to say, for example, "I don't like your taking my pencil. I don't feel like sharing just now."

## **The Role of Discipline**

Good discipline includes creating an atmosphere of quiet firmness, clarity, and conscientiousness, while using reasoning. Bad discipline involves punishment which is unduly harsh and inappropriate, and it is often associated with verbal ridicule and attacks on the child's integrity.

As one fourth-grade teacher put it: "One of the most important goals we strive for as parents, educators, and mental health professionals is to help children develop respect for themselves and others." While arriving at this goal takes years of patient practice, it is a vital process in which parents, teachers, and all caring adults can play a crucial and exciting role. In order to accomplish this, we must see children as worthy human beings and be sincere in dealing with them.

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Adapted from "The Aggressive Child" by Luleen S. Anderson, PhD, which appeared in *Children Today* (Jan-Feb 1978) and published by the Children's Bureau, ACYF, DHEW. (Reprinting permission unnecessary.)