

How to Help Children Safely Express Their Anger

Children frequently get the message that it is not okay to feel angry, and it is usually because they get reprimanded when they are expressing their anger in an inappropriate way. As a result, children often begin to “over-control” their feelings. This can result in angry outbursts or depression. The key is to let children know that it is okay to feel mad, but it is not okay to be mean. Since children are very concrete, they need specific guidelines and rules on how to express their anger.

Obviously, any physical activity is a good release. Encouraging children to become involved in sports, such as basketball and soccer, are wonderful choices. However, children also need some options for those times in which they cannot leave the house or cannot leave their room. When do most children get angry? My experience says that it is when they are in trouble and sent to their room!

Children need to know that there are socially acceptable ways to express their anger dependent on their environment. For example, it may be okay to draw angry pictures in your room at home, but it is not acceptable to do it in classroom during instruction time. In order to guide children, I encourage children to ask themselves three questions:

- 1) Will this behavior get me in trouble or break a rule?
- 2) Will this behavior hurt me or anyone else?
- 3) Could this behavior break something valuable?

I recommend that parents discuss appropriate anger release options with their children when they are calm. Listed below are some ways children could express their anger privately. It is important that ground rules are established for some of the suggestions, i.e. you can only tear up old magazines and you must clean up after yourself. Parents can model the behavior for the child before hand.

It is best if a parent is with the child when they express their anger in order to ensure that he/she is staying safe, the child is breathing deeply, and the child is focusing on their anger. Parents should share encouraging words like, “It is okay to let it out.” “You can let it out safely.” But, parents need to NOT criticize, laugh or problem solve with children while they are expressing their anger. The child should feel better, calmer, and more peaceful after expressing their anger in one of these ways. If they child is not able to calm down after about 25 minutes, please consult a counselor or therapist.

Here are some options to help you begin your discussion with your child:

- Punch a pillow

- Tear old magazines or phone books
- Squeeze or wring a towel
- Squash pieces of paper & throw them
- Write about your angry feelings
- Draw pictures of what your anger looks like
- Scream into a pillow
- Do an angry dance to music
- Smash aluminum cans
- Growl into a mirror
- Write a letter to the person you are angry at, but don't send it
- Write the name of someone you are angry with on a piece of toilet paper and flush it
- If you have clay, punch it with your fist or pound it with a rubber mallet
- Chew gum & imagine you are biting someone
- Talk into a tape recorder about your angry feelings and then erase it

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