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FOCUS ON CHILDREN

Dealing With The Angry Child

Helping children to handle their angry feelings in a constructive way is a problem for most parents and teachers. It is a problem because many parents and teachers were never taught how to handle their own anger. When we adults were children, we were taught that it was bad to be angry. We were made to feel guilty if we expressed our anger; so, we learned to hide our angry feelings. Now it is hard for us to teach children how to handle their angry feelings.

Young children don't know how to express anger in an acceptable way. When they get angry, they may take it out on a smaller child, blame someone else, scream, hit, or pretend that a big giant will come and rescue them.

Many children grow up ashamed of their feelings. They have been taught that it is "bad" to be angry. It is much more helpful for children to learn that everyone has angry feelings at times. They need to learn to cope with their feelings in a healthy way, not repress them. Repressed feelings are often the cause of migraines, high blood pressure and ulcers in adults.



When a young child is angry, it does no good to tell him he should not feel that way. For example, when a child is angry and says he hates you, it is not helpful to tell him, "That isn't nice," or "You are a bad boy to say that." Angry feelings exist, and we need to recognize their existence and help the child learn to cope with them.

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Remember. It isn't "bad" to be angry, but it is "bad" to express angry feelings in such a way as to hurt others. Actions that hurt others are "bad", but a person is not "bad" because he feels angry.



WHAT CAUSES ANGRY FEELINGS?

To help children deal with their anger in an acceptable way, we need to know what caused the anger. Basically, anger is caused by frustration. Anger can be triggered by failure, low self-esteem, or feelings of isolation; it may also be related to anxiety about situations over which the child has no control.

Sometimes children's anger is closely related to sadness and depression. Much of what an adult experiences as sadness is expressed by a child as anger.

RESPONDING TO THE ANGRY CHILD

In dealing with an angry child our objective as parents and teachers is to teach him how to handle his angry feelings, not to punish him. It is not enough to tell the child that angry behavior is unacceptable; we must also teach him acceptable ways of coping with anger. And contrary to popular opinion, punishment is not the most effective way to teach children acceptable ways of expressing anger.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with the angry child and helping him learn to cope with his angry feelings:

- *Teach the child to consider angry feelings as a problem to be solved.*

Teach him to use his mind to solve problems, to think about solutions to the problem other than getting mad. Getting mad doesn't solve the problem.

- *Help the child express angry feelings in words.*

Words are better than fists to express angry feelings. The words should tell how the child feels, not what he thinks about the other child. For example, teach him to say, "That hurts!" not "You're mean. I hate you!" Words which hurt others are not acceptable ways of handling anger.

- *Use "You-messages" to encourage the child to express his feelings in words.*

When the child expresses his feelings in words, you can help him learn how to cope with them. You can't help him if he hides

his feelings. "You-messages" describe the child's feelings. For example, "You are mad because Jenny wouldn't let you play with her new baby doll."



"You-messages" encourage the child to express his troublesome feelings. When children are allowed to express angry feelings freely, they seem to disappear like magic. Remember how much better you felt after unburdening yourself to a spouse or friend?

- *Teach by your example.*

If you scream at your children when you are angry with them, they are learning to scream when they get angry. If you smack your children when you get mad at them, they are learning to use physical aggression to express their angry feelings.

- *Help the child learn to get rid of angry, tense feelings through vigorous physical activity such as:*

running
digging
pounding nails in a board
punching a punching bag

- *Help the child forget about angry feelings, by interesting him in an activity which will take his mind off the feeling.*

Young children's feelings change quickly--"up" one minute and "down" the next.

- *Help the child get rid of tense feelings through soothing activities such as:*

making mud pies and playing in sand
taking a warm "bubble" bath
playing in a sink full of warm, sudsy water
playing with play dough or finger painting

- *Interest the child in an absorbing activity, such as making cookies.*

Once the child has calmed down, it is easier to talk to him about what angered him and what he can do about it.

- *Use closeness and touching.*

Angry impulses often go away quickly when an adult soothes and comforts the child.

- *Express interest in the child's activities.*

A child about to use a toy in a destructive way is sometimes easily stopped by an adult who shows interest--"Show me how the toy works."

- *Tell the child how you feel.*

For example, a parent can say, "That noise you are making doesn't usually bother me, but today I've got a headache, so could you find something else you enjoy doing?"

● Use physical restraint.

Occasionally a child may lose control so completely he has to be physically restrained to prevent him from hurting himself or others. Simply hold him in your arms until he quiets down and you can talk to him.

● Catch the child being good.

Tell the child what behaviors please you. For example, you can make comments such as, "You did a good job of dressing yourself"; "I'm glad you remembered to wash your hands"; "Thanks for picking up your toys so quickly," and "I really appreciate your taking the trash out."

Most parents are quick to comment on "bad" behavior, but they forget to comment on "good" behavior. If parents do this more often, the child will have fewer reasons to feel anger.

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To summarize, children can learn to handle angry feelings the way adults handle them--by talking about them to a trusted friend, by vigorous physical activity, and by getting involved in soothing or interesting activities, such as a bubble bath or listening to a story.



Reference: "The Aggressive Child,"
L. Anderson, Children Today (Jan.-
Feb. '79), in DHEW Pub. # (ADM) 79-78

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