

Big feelings are OK to have, but we can express them poorly. It is OK to be mad; it is OK to be sad, but we have to deal with these feelings in healthy ways. You probably already know this, but a child doesn't. They are just starting to feel these emotions, and they aren't sure what to do with them. A lot of their reactions will be based on how you teach them to handle their feelings. And, a lot of their reactions are based on what they have seen you do. The good news is that you can help your child learn the right way to react and express emotions, but it will take some work on your part.

What is Anger?

Anger is more than enraged actions. Anger is a feeling used to hide more intense or scary feelings. Anger can hide fear, grief, frustration, embarrassment, jealousy, shame, or insecurity. These underlying feelings may come out as anger so that we can protect ourselves, make a change, or help reduce *intense feelings* until it feels safe to unpack them. So, what is anger? Anger is a strong, protective emotion that often masks other feelings. It is both emotional and physical.

Why Do Kids Get Angry?

Lack of self-regulation. A child's inexperience and inability to work through their *feelings* is a big reason for anger. Children need to be allowed to express their big emotions with our help and guidance. If they aren't able to do this, then their big feelings may get expressed in unhealthy ways, such as meltdowns or aggressive behavior.

Anxiety/Stress. Kids who are more sensitive to anxiety or stress may express it in anger. Remember, anger both hides and diffuses intense feelings. If your child is under a lot of stress or there are a lot of changes or struggles at home, your extra support can help them understand and relieve their stress.

Trauma. In a child who has suffered trauma, such as an act of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, anger can be a symptom of an emotional wound. Emotional wounds are hard to sort out, even for us adults. But in children, those wounds might be expressed in angry meltdowns, acting out, and aggressive behavior.

Developmental differences. Excessive anger can be a symptom of a developmental disability. For example, children with Autism can express fear, anxiety, or frustration through meltdowns or aggressive behavior. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—ADHD—can react in anger because they struggle with controlling their emotions and impulses. Only your medical provider can diagnose your child with a developmental disability. If your child's anger is *out of control*, if they are hurting you, others, or themselves, then see your medical provider or family counselor. It's important to get a diagnosis from an expert who can get to the root of the problem.

How You Should Respond to Your Child's Anger

You should respond in a way that helps your child feel heard and understood, rather than resorting to punishment or telling them to stop. This makes more sense if you see anger as a cover for something more. Remember, it's usually an expression of other intense feelings that your child can't cope with.

Stay calm. The *calmer* you are, the less fuel you'll add to your child's anger. Yelling, spanking, or arguing will not help your child's anger or teach them important skills. Nor will responding in sarcasm.

Talk through problems. Once emotions have calmed, and your child can talk, sit down and discuss the situation. Start off with empathy by asking questions that allow your child to explain why they got so angry, and then help them talk through better ways to handle an angry situation. Don't discount their feelings, even if they seem silly or irrational to you.

Don't Give In. Children learn to regulate their anger and manage disappointments when they learn that it isn't effective in getting what they want.

Use fair consequences for bad behavior. Communicate and use consistent and fair consequences for unacceptable behavior. Kids understand cause and effect, so they can understand that their actions carry certain consequences. They may not like it, but they get it. Consequences are different than punishment because they teach responsibility for behavior. For example, time-outs are for calming down, thrown toys are removed for protection. Unfair consequences don't teach your child to *manage* their anger, and it can actually increase it.

Practice positive parenting. When you see your child handling a situation well, then praise them in the act.

Handle your own anger well. As hard as it is, consider how you respond when you're angry about something. If you blow up easily, then your child might too. If you lash out, then so might your child.

Resources include:

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2. Siegel DJ. Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation. Bantam; 2010.
3. Child Mind Institute. How Can We Help Kids With Self-Regulation? Found at <https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>, accessed 9/12/2019.
4. Al Odhayani A, Watson WJ, Watson L. Behavioural consequences of child abuse. *Can Fam Physician*. 2013 Aug;59(8):831-6. PMID: 23946022; PMCID: PMC3743691.
5. Promises Behavioral Health. Anger and Trauma. Found at <https://www.promisesbehavioralhealth.com/trauma-ptsd/anger-and-trauma/>, accessed 9/12/2019.
6. Australian Government Department of Social Services. Raising Children Network. Aggressive Behaviour: Children and Teenagers with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Found at <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/behaviour/common-concerns/aggressive-behaviour-asd#aggressive-behaviour-self-injury-and-autism-spectrum-disorder-nav-title>, accessed 9/12/2019.
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8. Child Mind Institute. Angry Kids: Dealing with Explosive Behavior. Found at <https://childmind.org/article/angry-kids-dealing-with-explosive-behavior/>, accessed 9/12/2019.
9. Child Development Institute. Anger Management for Kids and Parents. Found at https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/how-to-be-a-parent/angry_child/#gs.2t3ds8, accessed 9/12/2019.
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