

Anger in the Family

“You’re mean! I hate you!” When you’re tenderly cradling your newborn baby, you never expect that some day your child will yell those words at you in anger. It may be even harder to imagine that one day you could feel like yelling in anger at this darling little one. In fact, strong emotions, including anger, are a normal part of life in close family relationships.

A Feeling, Neither Bad nor Good

Some people have learned that anger is bad, and we should try never to get mad. However, anger is just a feeling, even if it’s usually an intense one and therefore often uncomfortable. Anger signals us that something is going wrong, that something important to us is being threatened. It could be our physical safety, our relationships, our property or our ability to make our own choices. The feeling is neither good nor bad, but what we do next can be constructive or destructive. It’s what we might say or do under the influence of anger that can cause damage. For instance, toddlers get mad when someone else has the toy they want. That’s a normal reaction for a toddler, but children gradually learn to control their anger and find better ways to react than hitting the other person.

A physical reaction

No matter what our age, anger has an effect on our body and on our brain. There is a rush of hormones which prepare us for immediate and forceful action. At the same time, activity is reduced in the higher centres of our brain, the parts of our brain that consider consequences and control impulses. That’s why it’s not very useful to reason with someone in the grips of anger.

When young children say they hate *you*, what they really are telling you is that they hate what you are making them do—like going to bed right away—or what you are making them stop doing—like playing at the park. In other words, you’re doing your job as their parent and limiting their freedom to act. It’s important not to take their statements personally. This is not your adult best friend talking to you; this is a child whose brain is not fully developed and who doesn’t understand the full meaning of “hate.”

To help children manage their anger, it is important first to acknowledge it: “I can see that you’re *really*,

really mad!” Follow that up with some suggestions for burning off the anger energy without hurting anyone or damaging anything. A few ideas: rip up scrap paper, run up and down the stairs, punch a big cushion, throw a ball against the wall (outside!), or make a big drawing of the anger.

Provide a Model

Children learn how to deal with their emotions by watching their parents and caregivers. Here are a few ways to provide a healthy model:

- Notice what triggers your anger and prepare strategies for how you will act in those situations.
- Recognize that anger is usually a secondary emotion. First you feel scared (or frustrated, disappointed, exhausted, threatened, insulted, etc.), then you get mad. The adult who feels like spanking a child who has just run out into the street felt fear before being angry. The child needs to know about the fear which is the reason for the rule. Too often, the intensity of the anger hides the underlying feeling that would give a clue to the real problem. If you can see that your first feeling is helplessness, you can look for support instead of just getting mad.
- Learn to recognize the physical signs that happen just before an explosion so you can take steps to stop yourself before you “hit the roof”: breathe deeply, count to ten, leave the room. The release of chemicals in the body that comes with anger pushes you to act, and since your higher brain is not thinking clearly, you may regret what you do or say. Once the physical reaction has started, it is hard to stop it.
- If your energy is very high, blow off steam safely: pound pillows, scrub the floor, go for a run, scream at the top of your lungs in the shower.
- If you do get carried away, don’t try to talk about the problem before you have calmed back down. You risk getting back on the roller coaster ride of anger.
- When you feel you can focus on the problem without attacking the person, sit down together for some problem solving.
- Apologize for anything you regret saying or doing, and forgive yourself for being human.

by Betsy Mann