

Tips for Addressing Anger in the Family

Children see, children do. Kids and parents alike learn from others' behaviors. Children learn how to set the table, make the bed or handle anger and conflict by observing their parents and others in their lives. Even though a parent may tell a child to "do as I say, not as I do," it is more likely the child will behave in a fashion similar to what he or she has observed. Temperament, parenting styles, family troubles and stress all influence levels of anger and how it is handled in a family. Anger is not a behavior, it is an emotion; it is the choice one makes on how to behave when angry that is important. Children need good anger management role models and need parents to provide tools to handle anger in a healthy manner.

Teach your family to recognize their body's physiological responses to anger. When someone is angry or afraid, the brain sends messages to the extremities to get the body ready to fight or flee, which also alters the ability to reason. It takes several seconds for the brain to shift from "survival mode" to logical thinking mode. These signals warn us that anger is on the rise; learning to recognize them will help both parents and children manage strong emotions before they get out of control.

Common responses to anger include: clenched fists, racing pulse, throbbing temples, sweaty palms, and many other physiological indicators. Once these signals from the body are identified, stop, count to ten slowly or breathe deeply to allow the brain to begin thinking logically. Once composure has returned, think. Identify and invite options, then decide on the most appropriate way to handle the situation.

If counting to ten slowly is not effective, focus on your breathing: breathe slowly and deeply, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Other relaxation techniques may be helpful, such as listening to the sound of your breathing or relaxing major muscle groups. For each second between the triggering event and the reaction, the chance of making a healthier decision is greatly increased.

Reframe negative thoughts to positive ones. For instance, change "What a stupid way to do that!" to "What a creative way to do that!" Reframing is the process of changing the way a thought is presented so that it maintains its underlying meaning but takes on a more positive light. This technique helps to develop more rational beliefs and healthy coping strategies and to change negative thinking habits to positive.

Identify "stress behaviors." Stress can exacerbate angry outbursts. How do you or your children act when stress hormones surge through the body? Some parents say they become irritable, impatient, scream at the kids, or slam doors. Kids may not be able to sleep or may oversleep, be fussy, or even lose their appetite. Parental stress can be contagious to other family members. Signs of stress include:

- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Headache
- ◆ Diarrhea
- ◆ Tightness of the chest, neck, jaw, back muscles
- ◆ Anxiousness
- ◆ Diminished initiative
- ◆ Forgetfulness
- ◆ Disorganization

Identify triggers for anger. This can help manage anger and prevent it from escalating. Accusations,

blame, global statements such as “you always ...” or “you never ...”, tone of voice, criticism, put-downs, excuses, and power are just a few of the triggers that can affect both parents and children. Take time to analyze why these things cause reactions. Seek professional help if needed. Anger doesn’t have to be violent or damaging; it can be productive and solution-based.

Young children may experience anger because they lack language and therefore cannot express themselves adequately. They may instead communicate their displeasure or anger through behavior and actions. To help children learn to use words instead of actions to communicate, provide young children with possible words for the emotions they may be feeling. Good communication skills improve the likelihood that children will express their anger in appropriate ways.

Identify the feeling. As adults, we can help children by learning to better understand our own feelings. The “feeling part” of anger includes disappointment, fear, frustration, annoyance, irritation, resentment, jealousy, contempt and hurt feelings. Is it anger or something else? Identify the root of the feeling. Since anger is often caused by fear, hurt or frustration, this is an excellent place to start. Every time parents express their anger positively, they give their children a lesson in anger management.

Provide opportunities for family members to express how they feel in a safe environment, without opinions on the validity of those feelings. Help them learn to identify what is making them angry, how to control the anger, and how to change the way they perceive the incident.

Conflict and anger are a natural part of relationships. Parental modeling is essential to teach good anger management skills to children. Emotional coaching of children is associated with desirable child outcomes for better physical health, school performance, social skills, peer relations and psychological well-being. In addressing anger in the family, the goal is not to suppress or deny feelings, but to express them more wisely. This teaches family members how to express their strong emotions respectfully and how to manage their intensity. Family members need to step back, collect their thoughts, and see the situation more objectively.

Quick Tips for addressing anger in the family:

1. Identify and learn to recognize anger triggers and physiological cues indicating anger and/or stress
2. Count to ten to allow your brain to switch from survival mode to thinking mode
3. Teach and use words to express emotions
4. Provide a safe environment for expression of feelings
5. Use “I” messages instead of “you” messages
6. Model healthy ways to express or channel anger to get things done or make your needs known
7. Examine angry incidences to identify what is making you or your child angry, then practice resolving the anger in an appropriate manner
8. Use anger to identify problems and work to resolve the issue after your emotions diminish
9. Listen to, identify, and acknowledge the child’s feelings

For questions about caring for children, call our free

PARENTING ADVICE LINE

817-332-6399 (Monday - Friday, Noon - 3:00 p.m.)