

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's No 1 parenting educator



Helping kids manage anger

Kids need to learn that anger can be expressed in ways that are not hurtful to anyone including themselves.

Managing anger is one of the biggest emotional issues that children face. Children who can learn to manage their anger have a head start on handling fears and other emotions.

Currently, our community is undecided about how to handle anger. In fact, anger is discouraged as we see no place for it in homes, schools or community. 'Civilised people don't get angry' seems to be the accepted wisdom so we tend to encourage children to bottle up anger rather than let it out.

Anger needs to be managed, rather than simply avoided. Bury anger deep-down and it will go away is the attitude! This doesn't work for many children as bottled up emotions don't always dissipate. They simmer away, eventually spilling over into physical violence or hurtful verbal abuse, which so often backfires on the angry person.

Kids need to learn that anger can be expressed in ways that are not hurtful to anyone including themselves. Here are six steps that parents can use to help kids of all ages keep their emotions under check, and respond safely when emotions run high:

- 1. Understand it:** Help kids understand the events and situations that trigger angry responses. These situations will vary, but may include, playing rough games, not getting their own way and being teased by others. Help kids to reflect on the events that trigger a 'wobbly', so they can take preventative measures. This type of self-knowledge is really helpful for older primary school children and teenagers
- 2. Name it:** Help them recognise the physical signs of anger, such as clenched fists and teeth, tension around their shoulders and heavy breathing. Then assist them to develop a vocabulary around anger. "Mad as a snake", "about to lose it", "throwing a tanty" are some possibilities. Children can probably generate more! Naming emotions promotes good emotional literacy in kids.
- 3. Diffuse it:** You need some strategies to diffuse anger and bring down emotional levels in kids. Distraction and time out can be effective for toddlers with short fuses, and even shorter attention spans. For older children, parents should use diplomacy rather than discipline. You may need to give some kids some space on their own before attempting to talk. Listening to their story,

validating their right to be mad and focusing on feelings are some ways to diffuse anger. Sometimes knowing that someone else knows how you feel is enough to make anger go away.

- 4. Choose it:** Help children understand that they do have a choice about how they respond to their anger. They may feel like lashing out, but they don't have to get physical or verbally aggressive when they get angry. Let kids know in clear terms that slamming doors, throwing things and refusing to cooperate are the wrong ways to display anger. Help them understand that while you are on their side, as they mature they need to choose socially acceptable ways of handling anger.
- 5. Say it:** Encourage children to express how they feel verbally, rather than bottle things up or become aggressive. The use of I statements is one way of letting others know how they feel. 'I feel really mad when you say nasty things to me. I really don't like it!' is one way of being heard and letting the anger out.
- 6. Let it out safely:** Boys, in particular, need physical outlets for pent up anger. They may go for a run, belt a pillow or play a physical game to let their frustration out. Some kids may even pour their anger into a letter, some work on a productive activity. Help children find legitimate outlets for their anger.

Parents need to role model healthy anger management so children see firsthand how adults handle anger in mature ways. That means parents take time to listen to each other, talk things through and find healthy physical ways to let off steam when you feel yourself getting to boiling point.

The maxim for families who want to learn to manage anger in healthy ways should be: "There is nothing so bad that we can't talk about it. However there are behaviours that are not acceptable."

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