

5 Ways to Help Kids Handle Anger

By Sarah Arnold, Psy.D.

“When I feel angry, I want to say something mean, or yell, or hit. But feeling like I want to is not the same as doing it. Feeling can’t hurt anyone or get me in trouble, but doing can.”

These are words from a kids’ book, *When I Feel Angry*, by C. Spelman. What if our entire world, kids and adults, lived by these words?

Anger is an inevitable part of life, but there are positive and negative ways to handle it. Too often the daily news confirms the fact that many children and teens are struggling to handle their anger in a positive way.

In today’s increasingly violent world, children see violence and aggression depicted on TV, even on their favorite cartoon. In fact, in the US, 57% of TV programs between 6 am and 11 am contain violent scenes, often in the form of repeated aggressive acts that go unpunished. It may be hard to believe, but the average child in the US sees 45 acts of violence on TV each day, and this doesn’t even begin to factor in video game usage.

Children see lots of ways to handle anger in negative ways, so in today’s world, learning to cope with anger and frustration in a positive way may be one of the most important things your child learns. So, how can we teach our kids to deal with their anger? Consider the following:

BE A ROLE MODEL

The best way to teach is by example. Of course, you get angry too. When your patience gets tested, whether by your child’s anger outburst or a completely different situation, you’ll need to show how to handle your anger positively. Screaming “CALM DOWN NOW” rarely is effective, but calming down with your child can be momentous.

Talking aloud during a random frustrating situation can also show kids how you manage feelings of anger. You might say, “I’m upset that the car won’t start, so I’m going to take three deep breaths to calm down and then I will problem solve how to handle this situation.” This not only teaches kids to use their words to express their anger, but it also helps them understand the source of your anger (since kids may think they are the source of your anger). It also shows them ways to calm down, and if you continue to talk your way through the problem, it teaches them how to problem solve.

IDENTIFY FEELINGS

Kids often explode in anger, but are not able to tell you what they are angry about. When kids don’t know how to express their frustrations, they may kick, scream, swear, or hit. Teach them to communicate their feelings by helping them to identify various feeling words.

Then, talk to them about examples of feelings in daily life. For instance, “I feel angry when Jenny calls me names because it embarrasses me.” Helping children realize that there are hidden feelings and actions beneath angry emotions, not only helps them appropriately verbalize their feelings so others can understand them, but will also help them understand their own feelings and anger triggers.

PRACTICE RELAXATION

Teach your child anger control and relaxation strategies. There are countless strategies you could teach them, but here are a few:

- Take three, deep, slow breathes from your tummy
- Count to 10
- Count backwards from 10 to 1 -Pretend your anger is a thermometer and you are bringing the red mercury from the top (#10) down to the bottom (#1).
- Draw a picture
- Walk away from the situation
- Play with clay
- Use your words and ask for help
- Listen to music
- Do an activity - play a sport, walk a dog, read a book
- Write about your feelings

TEACH PROBLEM SOLVING

Teach children basic problem-solving skills so when upsetting situations arise, they will be more likely to think through the situation and make positive choices in a calm manner. You can teach your child steps to solve problems such as:

1. Stop
2. Listen to the other person
3. Name the problem
4. Think of 3 ways to solve the problem
5. Make the best choice
6. Evaluate the plan

You will have to work with kids to practice the sequence using several examples on a regular basis, but with more practice, they are more likely to think through situations. Then, when you see kids beginning to show frustration, ask them, “What do you think sounds like a good solution to this problem?” This teaches them ways to prevent anger outbursts and allows them practice solving conflicts in positive ways.

ACKNOWLEDGE GOOD BEHAVIOR

When children do handle their anger in positive ways, praise them. Take every opportunity to strengthen their awareness of their

- abilities to positively manage anger
- abilities to make positive choices

Increasing positive attention for good behavior will also decrease the likelihood of further negative attention seeking behavior. This allows children to see the benefits of positively managing anger rather than acting out in anger.

Essentially, what you are teaching kids is

*It is OK to feel angry, but it is
not OK to hurt someone because
we are angry.*

The tricky part is, we not only have to teach this to kids, but we, as a community, have to show this to kids also.