

Helping Children Handle Anger

There's a big payoff in helping children learn how to handle their feelings, not just the pleasant ones like joy and delight, but the tough ones such as frustration and anger. All aspects of a child's social life - accepting herself, feeling confident, respecting others, acting responsibly and becoming successful - are rooted in how well she deals with her feelings. Children who understand, accept and express their emotions are more effective socially and developmentally and are healthier mentally and physically.

Adults are usually pleased when children express feelings they consider good - joy, wonder, delight - but have a hard time dealing with the so-called negative emotions like frustration, sadness and especially anger. If we can't accept our children's anger, we can hardly expect them to accept their own uncomfortable feelings.

Anger is a natural and valuable part of a child's emotional repertoire. It's a protective response to any perceived threats to their well being. Anger, like all our feelings, is a feature of being human. You can deal with children's anger in two steps. First, help the child put his feelings into words. Second, define appropriate ways he can let off steam and release the emotional and physical pressure of strong emotions.

Try to get your own emotions under control before dealing with an angry child. Step back, take a deep breath and do whatever you can to keep from getting caught up in the child's anger. If you can't pull back emotionally, you're likely to get angry yourself. When this happens, the child may see you as the enemy and source of his anger, not the friend and helper you want to be. Remember: the child's anger belongs to him, even if you're the brunt of it.

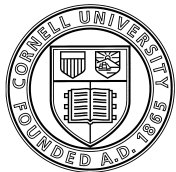
What you want to show is that you're on the child's side. What children really want from caring adults is recognition of their painful feelings. You show this kind of support when you allow a child the time and space to vent strong emotions and when you really listen to her. If the child is very young, at the temper tantrum stage, you can say you'll wait until he is finished.

You can show a child you're on her side by using reflective listening and helping put feelings into words. Responses like "Wow, you're really mad!" or "Sounds like you're really hurting" show acceptance of the child's feelings and open the door for more communication. Notice that these statements are descriptive and not judgmental. Avoid making comments like, "What are you so mad about?" or "You're letting your feelings get the best of you" that are heard as non-acceptance and criticism by the child. Let him say whatever he needs to say. Keep in mind that what you're hearing is the child's perception of the situation. He has a right to his point of view and needs you to validate that right, even though you may see the situation quite differently.

Keep your focus on the child's feelings and try to understand them. Avoid the temptation to try to fix the situation and make it better. In the heat of the moment, children aren't interested in advice, consolation or constructive criticism. What they're looking for is understanding.



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If you see that the child is angry but hasn't said anything, ask what's going on. If the child says "Nothing!" then reflect that back. You might say, "I can see that something's bothering you but maybe you don't want to talk about it right now." Often accepting a child's refusal to talk is just the ticket to getting him to say what's on his mind.

You also have to deal with the physical side of anger. When a child becomes angry over a disappointment or a perceived injustice, expressing those feelings carries with it the need to discharge energy, to let off steam. In fact, the word "emotion" can be thought of as "e-motion" or energy that moves through us and moves us to act to restore a sense of well being. Just as children jump with joy, they explode with anger.

Children need an adult's help to channel this energy in non-destructive ways. Just as you want them to feel confident that they will be listened to with respect, you also want them to know that there are limits to their physical behavior. While accepting their feelings, never accept any destructive acting out of angry feelings. It's O.K. for a child to say she wants to hit you as long as she doesn't actually do it.

Set limits about appropriate behavior, then offer acceptable options. For example, you might say, "I know you're really mad, but you can't hit me and you can't break your toy. But it's O.K. to stamp your feet, punch a pillow or go to your room and scream."

Once you've helped the child put feelings into words and let off some steam, then you can help him deal constructively with whatever caused the angry feelings in the first place. At this point, many children are able to go ahead and solve the underlying problem themselves.

Showing children that it's O.K. to express strong feelings seems awkward at first because most adults automatically want to fix things and make kids happy again. But we can never really shield children from pain because pain is a part of life and, in fact, helps us learn and grow. So our goal is to help children accept painful experiences and learn from them.

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