

Parental Anger

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Parents often ask: "Is it OK to be angry in front of my kids?" and "Is it OK to be angry *at* my kids, or does that make me a bad parent?" and "What if my partner and I get in a fight when the kids are in the room?" The reality is that anger is a very basic human emotion, and we *all* feel it sometimes. Rather than trying to hold yourself up to an impossible standard of never getting angry, accept that anger will happen and make a plan for how you will manage it.

If our children see us get angry and then *calm ourselves down*, they learn many things: it's normal to get angry, being angry doesn't make you a bad person, being angry doesn't have to mean losing control, and it is possible to calm yourself down from a big emotional meltdown.

Plan for Preventing (or Reducing) Eruptions of Anger

- Eat, Sleep, and Be Well: Just as a child is more likely to melt down when hungry, tired, or sick, so are we. As much as possible, take care of your body.
- Get support from others. Talking to others (especially other parents) can help!
- Reduce Stress: The more stressed we are, the more likely we'll get upset by little things. Reduce stress through exercise, conscious relaxation, time outdoors, and self-care.
- Figure out your triggers: what situations set off your anger? What can you do to reduce your chance of encountering triggers or settle yourself as you feel anger coming on?
- Look for patterns: If you yell at your child at the same time every day, make changes in your routine to help things go better. If you battle over the same issue again and again, re-evaluate what limits you want to set and consistent consequences you'll enforce.
- Heal your past: If you have unresolved issues in your emotional / family history, get support with processing them, so you don't take that historical anger out on your kids.
- Acknowledge to your child if there are short-term issues affecting you: "I'm really stressed about work right now. I may act grumpier than usual. But it's not your fault."

Options for Coping with Anger in the Moment

- Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.
- Concentrate on counting to 10. Don't say/do anything to your child before you reach 10.
- Put your hands in your pockets. This helps you resist the urge to hit or threaten to hit.
- Ask for a break / give yourself a timeout to calm down. Go to another room if possible.

Take Time to Process The Situation

- After you calm down – spend some time reflecting on the situation.
 - Anger is often rooted in fear, sadness / grief, or feeling hurt. So, you may ask yourself: "what am I afraid of?" or "what am I grieving for?"
 - It can also be a sign of unmet needs. What might you be lacking and is there any way to get more of it or ask for more support?
- Journal. Writing out your thoughts can be a great way to discover what they are!
- Write a letter (but don't send it) to the person who made you angry.
- Find a release. Anger can build up a lot of physical energy that needs a release. Try exercising, punching a pillow, cleaning the house, shredding a piece of paper, cranking up loud and obnoxious angry music and dancing and yelling along to it.

What if you're angry *at* your child?

- Are your expectations appropriate? If you find yourself saying "Kids your age are supposed to do X." or "no matter how hard I try, I can't make my kid do Y..." you are making an assumption about what they're developmentally capable of. Double-check child development sources to make sure your expectations are fair.
- Is this a phase? There are predictable periods in children's lives where they go through lots of developmental changes – "periods of disequilibrium". They tend to be pretty hard to live with at these times. Seek extra support to help you through these rough patches.
- Are they testing you? It's normal for all kids to test their limits. It's how they learn the rules. But it can be infuriating when they do the same thing over and over even when "they know it's wrong". Try not to over-react. Calmly and consistently reinforce limits.
- Do you need a new discipline plan or new parenting skills? Seek out classes or books.
- Is your child just trying to get your attention? How does your child feel right now? Are they angry themselves? Scared? Lonely? Try to empathize with what they need.
- Are you actually angry at someone / something else? Then your child may do something minor that makes you explode and take out your anger on them. Try to catch this when it's happening, and if you can't, go back to your child later and apologize to them.

Fighting with Your Partner

It is unhealthy for kids to be around their parents' fights if the parents are hostile or shaming, threatening, insulting each other, dragging up every example of wrong-doing from their whole history, or storming away in anger. This sort of family conflict is associated with guilt and shame, depression, withdrawal, anxiety disorders, aggression and impulse control issues. Sulking, the silent treatment and the cold shoulder are just as hard on kids. They sense the tension and know something is wrong, but don't know what it is, and whether it's their fault.

On the other hand, if parents can keep things civil and disagree in a healthy way, that can actually benefit the kids. If you're respectful and loving toward each other even in an argument, if you stay focused on the current issue, and if you resolve things before walking away, this can show your kids that people can disagree, and can work out their differences in a constructive manner. They learn that negotiation, compromise, and resolution are possible.

Note: If you are having disagreements specifically about parenting choices, like family rules, try not to argue about those in front of the kids. It's better to resolve those issues out of their view so you can present a united front to them.

Resolution

If you fought with your partner in front of your child, be sure to let the child know when you have resolved the argument and that things are OK now between you and your partner.

If you behaved inappropriately, apologize. Say "I was mad, and it's OK to be mad. But, it's not OK to..." (This is also a great message to give your children when they're angry: "Your feelings are always OK. But sometimes the behavior is not, so I need to set limits on that.")

Re-connect. Do something fun or relaxing with your family to heal the stress.

Kids interpret our anger within the whole context of the relationship. If it's a loving, caring, supportive family, with a lot of consistent routines, and reliable commitment to each other's well-being, then an occasional "tantrum" from the parent won't cause the child great distress.

Learn more: Read more on this topic and much more at www.gooddayswithkids.com