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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Help Children Handle Their Anger**

Parents often are concerned that their three, four, and five-year-old children will say mean things, or even very occasionally hit. The management of children's anger has both external (behavioral) and internal (thinking and feeling) dimensions, and we will address both so that parents can be in the strongest position to help their children.

**What is anger?:** Anger is always a self-protective response to some other unpleasant emotion. It is as if anger is a pre-wired response that everyone experiences when they feel vulnerable to something happening to them or experience a painful emotion. Some common emotions that may stimulate anger are anxiety, helplessness, shame or guilt. Sometimes the emotional basis of the anger is clear to parents and/or children (conscious). Other times the basis is murky (unconscious). Either way, there is still an emotional reason for the anger.

**The big picture:** Children must learn to manage their outward expression of anger by learning to not hurt others through their words or actions, unless such action is necessary or justified. (Different individuals, families and ethical traditions have different understandings of what is considered necessary or justified.) Children must also learn to manage their interior relationship to anger. Because anger is an inevitable, biologically based reaction to painful emotional states, everyone experiences states of anger each day.

It is possible to remain excessively angry inside while successfully managing outside expressions of anger. Such a situation can lead to many different kinds of psychological distress and interference.

So how can parents help their children to manage anger — outside and inside?

**Managing outward behavior:** The following are some guidelines to help children manage their outward behavior:

- Provide consequences for unacceptable behavior, particularly if the child is emotionally or physically hurtful to others. Find the middle ground with consequences; they should be significant enough to make the point, but not so harsh that they stimulate excessive painful emotion and more anger for the child. Consequences that hurt him physically (corporal punishment) or humiliate a child are particularly likely to backfire in the long run.
- Remember that children are like sponges, absorbing their parents' attitudes and behavior even more than their advice. It is important that a child see that his or her parents manage their own anger without inflicting them unnecessarily on others, in their relationship with him or her and with each other. When a child misbehaves, it is most helpful for parents to convey their disappointment, and even anger, respectfully. Respectful anger expresses clear disapproval without being frightening or humiliating.

On the other hand, parents should support their child in feeling guilty about misbehavior. It is OK, and even desirable, to feel bad about misdeeds. Guilt is a friend and a guide; only excessive or misplaced guilt is problematic, which is an entirely different matter.

- Assume that a child, particularly by the time that they are 4 or 5-years-old knows the basics of proper behavior. There is no reason to remind a child that hitting hurts other people's feelings or that they may not want to play with him. It is more helpful to assume a collaborative attitude and put the responsibility more on his shoulders by saying something like: "Brian, I know that you want your friends to feel good about you, and that you care about your friends. How can I help you with your problem? You are making it hard for yourself to be the kind boy that you want to be." Remember that parents can be both the disciplinarian and the collaborator.

**Helping with Inner Development:** Assisting children to develop an increasingly helpful interior attitude toward their anger is a subtler task. Since anger is always a secondary emotion, an excessive focus upon the anger is a bit like chasing one's own tail. Parents are well advised to find ways to help children focus on what lies behind their anger. Here is an illustration:

*Jill loves her oatmeal. One Saturday she bounced down to breakfast only to hear her mother say, "Jill, we're out of oatmeal. How about some French toast?" Jill's mother knows that Jill enjoys French toast and was taken aback when Jill said: "I hate you. You never have what I like to eat."*

Wisely, Jill's mother did not remind her that she loves French toast, because that was not really the point and might have made Jill feel misunderstood and angrier. Jill was not making an objective statement about French toast. Rather, she was saying that only oatmeal would do at that moment. Instead, Jill's mother focused on her unacceptable way of expressing her anger and suggested another way Jill could have expressed her anger.

Jill's mother also responded: "I know that you love your oatmeal, and something is really upsetting you about not having it today. I am sorry you are so upset, and if you figure out why, you can tell me. I can make French toast if you want me to." Jill's mother encouraged Jill to look beyond her anger to the underlying reason.

The more that parents model this kind of orientation in their own life, or in parental discussions with a child, the more that a child can gradually develop the ability to understand the basis of his or her anger.

In some situations, these recommendations will not be sufficient. Usually this is when a child is dealing with excessive emotional distress that continues to drive his or her anger and behavior despite his efforts. Professional consultation may be advisable under those circumstances. However, most of the time, a dual focus on managing a child's behavior and helping him or her develop internal connections with the sources of the anger will provide the help that a child needs. A child's real maturity comes from a growing ability

to manage his or her internal reactions. When that happens, children will know what their reactions are about and what they can do about them. Children will be in strongest position to sort out excessive or personally based reactions from reactions that are based in real situations outside themselves that require them to take assertive action.