

Anger: It's only natural

Everyone knows anger. It is an emotion we experience in its many forms throughout our lives. We are also familiar with the problems emanating from an inability to control anger. Because we love our children we want to ensure they avoid these problems.



Many adults learnt during their childhood that anger is not acceptable and should be suppressed, and they sustain this view. However, this view fails to identify that anger has two discrete facets—feelings and actions. Feelings of anger are neither good nor bad; it is only actions which can be labelled in this way. Similarly with all emotions we cannot observe anger, which is precipitated by other feelings such as fear or frustration. Rather we infer it from actions.

Feelings of anger are natural and are merely signals that something is wrong. We can choose what we will do or say in response to the signals. It is the response which can be considered either constructive or destructive. The task for parents then becomes one of assisting their children develop the skills to choose appropriate responses.

Anger in young children is no less normal than crying. It is a means of children communicating their desires or needs. An infant crying to communicate hunger is fed and most likely comforted with: “You were so hungry weren't you? You feel better now.” A child angering should receive a like response. For example, an infant sensing abandonment when their parent leaves them at child care may anger—the response to the child would be: “You are unhappy because mummy has gone. You love to be with her, don't you? She will be back later. Come and have a play with ... You like that.”

Betsy Mann, in her article *Anger and Children*, neatly packages the above responses as “intentional dialogue”. She sees the process with three elements—mirroring, validating and empathising. We mirror by reflecting the content of the child's message. We validate and empathise by expressing understanding of the message and of the child's feelings.

With slightly older children who are “angering big time” (tantrums), the safety of others and the child may well be the first priority, but secondary responses from adults include:

- Verbalising the child's feelings for them e.g. “You're certainly very upset right now.”
- Being consistent by never giving in to their demands as a means of ending their angering.

- Defusing with a limited choice e.g. “You can have a piece of fruit or a drink of milk” (not the lollies sitting on the window sill).

Clearly strategies can be implemented each day to help your child develop an ability to deal with angry feelings and to make suitable choices when they are angry. These include:

- Modelling appropriate responses to your own feelings of anger. Offering children choices in other areas of their lives so that they learn that choices have consequences.
- Discussing children’s past responses to their anger which have resulted in distress to them and/or others, ensuring that alternative more appropriate responses are considered. (Care needs to be taken here that past examples selected assist rather than demoralise.)
- Training your child to select an interim activity as a diversion until their initial angry feelings subside. The child can then decide the next step more rationally. For example, a child may wish to complete a jigsaw puzzle at these times.
- Ensuring, for younger children, times for food and rest are regular; sufficient suitable toys are available; and, your expectations of their behaviour are realistic. This minimises the likelihood of discomfort, frustration etc. causing anger.

Interacting with children in this way develops their ability to give thoughtful, controlled responses to angry feelings. Isn’t that what we wish for them (and ourselves)?