



Why We Get So Angry at Our Kids

Parents and kids have the ability to trigger each other as no one else can. Even as adults we are often irrational in relation to our own parents. (Who has greater power to annoy you? Make you act childish?)

Similarly, our kids push our buttons precisely because they are our children. Psychologists call this phenomenon “ghosts in the nursery,” by which they mean that our children stimulate the intense feelings of our own childhoods, and we often respond by unconsciously re-enacting the past that’s etched like forgotten hieroglyphics deep in our psyches. The fears and rage of childhood are powerful and can overwhelm us even as adults. It can be enormously challenging to lay these ghosts to rest.

It helps to know all this, if we are struggling to cope with anger. Just as important, because it gives us incentive to control ourselves, we need to know that parental anger can be harmful to young children.

What Happens to Your Child When You Scream or Hit?

Imagine your husband or wife losing their temper and screaming at you. Now imagine them three times as big as you, towering over you. Imagine that you depend on that person completely for your food, shelter, safety, protection. Imagine they are your primary source of love and self-confidence and information about the world, that you have nowhere else to turn. Now take whatever feelings you have summoned up and magnify them by a factor of 1000. That is something like what happens inside your child when you get angry at him.

Of course, all of us get angry at our children, even, sometimes, enraged. The challenge is to call on our maturity so that we control the expression of that anger, and therefore minimize its negative impact.

Anger is scary enough. Name calling or other verbal abuse, in which the parent speaks disrespectfully to the child, takes a higher personal toll, since

the child is dependent on the parent for his very sense of self. And children who suffer physical violence, including spanking, have been proven to exhibit lasting negative effects that reach into every corner of their lives.

If your young child does not seem afraid of your anger, it's an indication that he or she has seen too much of it and has developed defenses against it -- and against you. The unfortunate result is a child who is less likely to want to behave to please you, and is more open to the influences of the peer group and the larger culture. That means you have some repair work to do. Whether or not they show it -- and the more often we get angry, the more defended they will be, and therefore less likely to show it -- our anger is nothing short of terrifying to young children.

How Can You Handle Your Own Anger?

Since you're human, you'll sometimes find yourself in "fight or flight" mode, and your child will start to look like the enemy. When we're swept with anger, we're physically ready to fight. Hormones and neurotransmitters are flooding our bodies. They cause your muscles to tense, your pulse to race, your breathing to quicken. It's impossible to stay calm at those points, but we all know that clobbering our kids -- while it might bring instant relief -- isn't really what we want to do.

So commit now to No hitting, No swearing, No calling your child names, or No meting out any punishment while angry. What about screaming? Never at your children, that's a tantrum. If you really need to scream, go into your car with the windows rolled up and scream where no one can hear, and don't use words, because those make you angrier.

Your children get angry too, so it's a double gift to them to find constructive ways to deal with your anger: you not only don't hurt them, you offer them a role model. Your children will certainly see you angry from time to time, and how you handle those situations will teach them a lot. Will you teach them that might makes right? That parents have tantrums too? That screaming is how adults handle conflict? If so, they'll adopt these behaviors as a badge of how grown-up they are.

Or will you model for your child that anger is part of being human, and that learning to manage anger responsibly is part of becoming mature? Here's how.

1. Set limits BEFORE you get angry.

Often when we get angry at our children, it's because we haven't set a limit,

and something is grating on us. The minute you start getting angry, it's a signal to do something. No, not yell. Intervene in a positive way to prevent more of whatever behavior is irritating you.

If your irritation is coming from you -- let's say you've just had a hard day, and their natural exuberance is wearing on you -- it can help to explain this to your children and ask them to be considerate and keep the behavior

that's irritating you in check, at least for now.

If the children are doing something that is increasingly annoying -- playing a game in which someone is likely to get hurt, stalling when you've asked them to do something, squabbling while you're on the phone -- you may need to interrupt what you're doing, restate your family rule or expectation, and redirect them, to keep the situation, and your anger, from escalating.

2. Make and post a list of acceptable ways to handle anger.

When you feel this angry, you need a way to calm down. Many people can harness their biology and get it under control just with awareness: Stop, breathe, remind yourself it isn't an emergency. Shake the tension out of your hands. Take ten more deep breaths. If you need to make a noise, hum.

You might try to find a way to laugh, which discharges the tension and shifts the mood. Even forcing yourself to smile sends a message to your nervous system that there's no emergency, and begins calming you down.

If you feel you need to physically discharge your rage, put on some music and dance. Some people still follow the timeworn advice to clobber a pillow, but it's best if you can do that kind of discharging in private, because watching you clobber that pillow can be pretty scary for your child. He knows perfectly well that the pillow is a stand-in for his head and the image of crazy hitting mommy will be seared into his memory. I should add that I personally think this is a questionable strategy, because research shows that hitting something --anything-- confirms to your subconscious that indeed this is an emergency and you should stay in "fight or flight." If you can breathe deeply and tolerate the angry feelings, you will probably notice that right under the anger is fear, sadness, disappointment. Let yourself feel those feelings and the anger will melt away.

3. Take Five.

Recognize that an angry state is a terrible starting place to intervene in any situation. Instead, give yourself a timeout and come back when you are able to be calm. Move away from your child physically so you won't be tempted to reach out and touch him violently. Just say, as calmly as you can, "I am too mad right now to talk about this. I am going to take a timeout and calm down." Exiting does not let your child win. It impresses upon them just how serious the infraction is, and it models self-control. Use this time to calm yourself, not to work yourself into a further frenzy about how right you are.

If your child is old enough to be left for a moment, you can go into the bathroom, splash water on your face, and do some breathing. But if your child is young enough to feel abandoned when you leave, just use the kitchen sink instead. Then, sit on the couch near your child for a few minutes, breathing deeply and silently saying a little mantra that restores your calm, like "This is not an emergency.....Kids need love most when they don't seem to deserve it.....He's acting out because he needs my help with his big feelings...This too shall pass." It's good role modeling for our kids to see how we regulate our big emotions.

4. Listen to your anger, rather than acting on it.

Anger, like other feelings, is as much a given as our arms and legs. What we're responsible for is what we choose to do with it. Anger often has a valuable lesson for us, but acting while we are angry, except in rare situations requiring self-defense, is rarely constructive, because we make choices we would never make from a rational state. The constructive way to handle anger is to limit our expression of it, and when we calm down, to use it diagnostically: what is so wrong in our life that we feel furious, and what do we need to do to change the situation?

Sometimes the answer is clearly related to our parenting: we need to enforce rules before things get out of hand, or start putting the children to bed half an hour earlier, or do some repair work on our relationship with our twelve year old so that she stops treating us rudely. Sometimes we are surprised to find that our anger is actually at our spouse who is not acting as a full partner in parenting, or even at our boss. And sometimes the answer is that we are carrying around anger we don't understand that spills out onto our kids, and we need to seek help through therapy or a parents support group.

5. Remember that "expressing" your anger to another person can reinforce and escalate it.

Despite the popular idea that we need to “express” our anger so that it doesn’t eat away at us, there’s nothing constructive about expressing anger to another person. Research shows that expressing anger while we are angry actually makes us more angry. This in turn makes the other person hurt, afraid, or angry, and causes a rift in the relationship. So discharge your anger physically if you need to, but then calm yourself and consider what the “message” of the anger is before you speak with the other person.

Rehashing the situation in our mind always proves to us that we are right and the other person is wrong, which again makes us more angry as we stew. What works is to find a constructive way to address whatever is making us angry so that the situation is resolved, and our anger stops being triggered.

6. WAIT before disciplining.

Make it a point NEVER to act while angry. Nothing says you have to issue edicts on the fly. Simply say something like *“I can’t believe you hit your brother after we’ve talked about hitting being against the rules. I need to think about this, and we will talk about it this afternoon. Until then, I expect you to be on your best behavior.”*

Once you’ve taken a ten-minute timeout and still don’t feel calm enough to relate constructively, you can say *“I want to think about what just happened, and we will talk about it later. In the meantime, I need to make dinner and you need to finish your homework, please.”*

After dinner, sit down with your child and, if necessary, set firm limits. But you will be more able to listen to his side of it, and to respond with reasonable, enforceable, respectful limits to his behavior.

7. Avoid physical force, no matter what.

85% of adolescents say they've been slapped or spanked by their parents (Journal of Psychopathology, 2007). And yet study after study has proven that spanking has a negative impact on children’s development that lasts throughout life. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends strongly against it.

I personally wonder if the epidemic of anxiety and depression among adults in our culture is caused in part by the aftermath of so many of us having grown up with adults who hurt us. Many parents minimize the physical violence they suffered, because the emotional pain is too great to acknowledge. But repressing that pain just makes us more likely to hit our

own children.

Spanking may make you feel better temporarily because it discharges your rage, but it is bad for your child, and ultimately sabotages everything positive you do as a parent. Spanking, and even slapping, has a way of escalating, sometimes into deadly violence.

Do whatever you need to do to control yourself, including leaving the room. If you can't control yourself and end up resorting to physical force, apologize to your child, tell him hitting is never ok, and get yourself some help.

8. Avoid threats.

Threats made while you're angry will be unreasonable. Since threats are only effective if you are willing to follow through on them, they undermine your authority and make it less likely that your kids will follow the rules next time. Instead, tell your child that you need to think about an appropriate response to this infraction of the rules. The suspense will be worse than hearing a string of threats they know you won't enforce.

9. Monitor your tone and word choice.

Research shows that the more calmly we speak, the calmer we feel, and the more calmly others respond to us. Similarly, use of swear words or other highly charged words makes us and our listener more upset, and the situation escalates. We have the power to calm or upset ourselves and the person we are speaking with by our own tone of voice and choice of words. (Remember, you're the role model.)

10. Consider that you're part of the problem.

If you're open to emotional growth, your child will always show you where you need to work on yourself. If you're not, it's hard to be an inspired parent. In every interaction with our child, we have the power to calm or escalate the situation. Your child may be acting in ways that aggravate you, but you are not a helpless victim. Take responsibility to manage your own emotions first. Your child may not become a little angel overnight, but his acting out will diminish dramatically once you learn to stay calm.

11. Still angry?

Look for the underlying feelings. Don't get attached to your anger. Once you've listened to it and made appropriate changes, let go of it. If that isn't

working, remember that anger is always a defense. It shields us from feeling vulnerable.

To get rid of anger, look at the hurt or fear under the anger. If your daughter's so obsessed with her friends that she's dismissive of the family and that hurts you, or your son's tantrums scare you, work with those feelings and situations, and address them. Once you get to the underlying feelings, your anger will dissipate.

12. Choose your battles.

Every negative interaction with your child uses up valuable relationship capital. Focus on what matters, such as the way your child treats other humans. In the larger scheme of things, her jacket on the floor may drive you crazy, but it probably isn't worth putting your relationship bank account in the red over.

13. Keep looking for effective ways to discipline that encourage better behavior.

There are hugely more effective ways to discipline than anger, and, in fact, disciplining with anger sets up a cycle that encourages misbehavior. Some parents are surprised to hear that there are families where the children are generally well-behaved, although physical force is never used and parental yelling is infrequent. In fact, it is my observation (although the research has yet to catch up because the numbers are small) that families where there is no discipline or yelling at all, but only empathic limits, produce kids who take complete responsibility for their behavior at an early age and are the best-adjusted emotionally. We know that punishment is ALWAYS a negative, and I would say that Discipline as we think of it is also counter-productive.

14. If you frequently struggle with your anger, seek counseling.

There's no shame in asking for help. The shame is in renegeing on your responsibility as a parent by damaging your child physically or psychologically.