

KEY ISSUES ABOUT ANGER FOR CHILDREN

Recognizing Anger

Anger is a normal and understandable reaction to divorce for both parents and children.

Not many of us deal with this emotion in a constructive way therefore coparents may need some guidance and perspective.

How parents manage their own anger often sets the stage for how children cope with this emotion.

When children get angry lots of parents struggle. This is often a phase where educational support can be extremely beneficial.

When children are feeling angry they may:

Act out, test limits or break rules.

Tell a parent "I hate you" or become disrespectful.

Blame one or both parents for the situation.

Throw temper tantrums or display other destructive behaviors like biting, hitting, fighting and kicking.

Have frequent emotional meltdowns.

Withdraw from family or emotionally shut down.

Engage in risky or dangerous behaviors. (teens and pre-adolescents).

Key issues for co-parents regarding children and anger

ONE PARENT GETS IT ALL

When parents split up it's not uncommon for one parent to deal with more of the anger and upset than the other. Typically this parent who a child feels a greater sense of security with (often the parent that provides more of the day-to-day care.)

When a child doesn't feel secure with a parent they may be reluctant to show how they feel. Many kids worry that they might lose a parent or cause them to leave.

This dynamic often creates conflict between co-parents. One parent assumes the kids are fine and the other is certain they are not.

DOUBLE BINDS

Often when kids get angry parents are really good at telling children what they can't do but not what they can do.

Along with validating your children's feelings, remember that kids need healthy and acceptable options for feeling angry and upset.

CO-PARENTS: LEAD BY EXAMPLE

While we would love to think our children "Do as we say, actually they tend to do as we do."

Therefore, when you chose to display your anger in destructive ways (i.e. badmouthing, insulting each other, name-calling, criticizing, ignoring, etc.) children will struggle to manage their own upset.

Kids may mimic a parent's behavior or be so uncomfortable with their aggressive behavior that they keep their feelings locked down.

Children may also grow to resent a bitter parent's upset and start distancing themselves from that parent.

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WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?

Managing Anger: children

When children are feeling angry they may:

- Act out, test limits, or break rules.
- Tell a parent "I hate you" or become disrespectful.
- Blame one or both parents for the divorce.
- Throw temper tantrums or display other destructive behaviors like biting, hitting, fighting, and kicking. This can be especially true for younger children.
- Have frequent emotional outbursts.
- Withdraw from family or emotionally shut down.
- Engage in risky or dangerous behaviors. (teens and pre-adolescents).

What to do when the anger hits

When children are feeling angry it's important to strike a balance between love and limits. If you are having problems with how your children are handling their anger, try the following:

SET ASIDE TIME TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT THIS ISSUE.

Be sure to choose a time when neither of you is angry. Having a conversation in the heat of the moment won't help you or your child.

SEPARATE THE FEELING FROM THE BEHAVIOR.

Validate your child's feelings. Let them know you understand this is a difficult time for them and give them a chance to share how they feel.

Explain that feeling angry isn't the problem, how they're handling it is.

IDENTIFY WHICH BEHAVIORS ARE A PROBLEM.

Talk with your child about which behaviors specifically are not acceptable (for example: hitting, being disrespectful, talking back, breaking things, etc.).

HELP THEM COME UP WITH OTHER OPTIONS.

Together make a list of at least 3 to 5 healthy acceptable ways they can express their anger. (Good examples are shooting hoops, going for a run, exercising, writing about why they are angry in a journal or diary, drawing or coloring their anger out, stepping away from the situation, taking a couple of deep breaths, counting until you cool off, taking a walk or talking to someone they trust.)

SET LIMITS

Let your child know what will happen if they choose to handle their anger in an unacceptable way. Make sure the consequence is both age-appropriate and enforceable. For example, with a younger child you may say, "If you hit Hannah with one of your toys, the toys will be put up for the rest of the day."

For a teen, you may consider withdrawing or limiting a privilege such as taking away a phone or not being able to go out with friends. Also, be clear about how long the consequence will be for all age groups.



IDEAS FOR MANAGING ANGER



Ideas for younger children

Deep breathing

Teach your children the benefit of belly breathing to help them calm down when they're angry or upset.

Ways to help kids breathe

- COUNT IT OUT.

Tell them to take a series of slow big breaths while they count to 10.

- BOX BREATHING

Have children breathe in and count to 4. Hold their breath for 4, breathe out for 4, and hold their breath again for 4.

- FIVE-FINGER BREATHING TECHNIQUE (see the following page)

Have children draw, color or paint their feelings

You can gauge how upset your child is by asking questions like... "How big is your anger?" or "What color is it?" "Would it fit in a box or fill the whole room?"

Get their bodies moving

Some children may need to physically release the anger. You can have them take a walk (no talking until they're ready)

Do sit-ups or push-ups until they don't feel angry anymore, run, or maybe throw a ball or shoot some hoops.

Other ideas

- Write in a journal or diary.
- Meditate.
- Listen to music.
- Go outside.
- Suggest your child does something that physically wears them out.
- Have them talk to someone they trust.
- Go for a walk or run.
- Walk away from the situation or take a time out to cool down.
- Draw a picture or have them write about what is making them upset.
- Squeeze a stress ball (try squashing some playdough)

Pro Parenting Tip

Praise and Acknowledge Good Self-Control

Doing something different when you're upset is hard. When your child does a good job of managing their anger or tries a new skill that's positive, be sure to acknowledge their accomplishment. Let them know you noticed how they handled the situation and that you're proud of the choice they made and they should be too!



5 Finger Breathing Technique

How to do it...

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- Ask your child set their left hand out flat in front of them. They can lay their hand on a table or the floor.
 - They can close their eyes or keep a fixed gaze if they feel comfortable.
 - Using their right pointer finger, encourage your child to trace the outline of their hand and go up and down around each finger.
 - Starting with their pinky finger, tell your child to breathe in as they trace upward and breathe out as they trace their finger downward.
 - Have your child breath in through their nose when tracing upward and out through their mouth when tracing downward.
 - Encourage your child to keep going until they have finished tracing their hand. Ask them to slow down if they seem to be breathing too fast.