How can parents help kids learn to manage their anger?

1. Start with yourself.

If you're in the habit of shouting at your kids, know that you are modeling behavior that your child will certainly copy. It can be tough to stop yourself from yelling at your child, but if you give in to that temptation, you can't expect your child to learn to control himself. Your child learns from watching you how to handle disagreements and conflict.

Your calm presence, even when he's mad, helps your child feel safe, which helps him develop the neural pathways in the brain that shut off the "fight or flight" response and allow the frontal cortex, the "reasoning brain," to take over. That's how kids learn to soothe themselves. They learn from your self-regulation that anger and other upsetting feelings are not so scary as they seem -- after all, Mom and Dad aren't scared of them.

2. De-Escalate.

You're probably good at staying calm when things are going well. What takes heroic effort is staying calm when things get turbulent. But yelling at an angry child reinforces what she's already feeling, which is that she is in danger. (You may not see why she would think she's in danger when she just socked her little brother, but a child who is lashing out is a child who is feeling threatened and defensive.) So your anger will only make the storm worse. Your job is to restore calm, because kids can only learn and understand how to "do better" when they're calm.

3. Remember that all feelings are allowed.

Only actions need to be limited. Why does this matter? Because when kids "stuff" their emotions, those feelings are no longer under conscious control. Then they pop out unregulated, and the child socks someone. If the emotions are allowed, the child can accept them, instead of trying to repress them. That gives her enough cognitive control over the feelings so that she can start putting them into words instead of hitting.

4. Give your child ways to manage his angry impulses in the moment.

Your child needs to know that you understand how upset he is and why. So he might need your support to express the anger physically, with you watching, so that you "witness" the depths of his upset. Obviously, you aren't going to let him beat up his brother, no matter how badly his brother behaved toward him. But you can help him redirect his rage. Remember that what's healing here isn't acting out the aggression, which can actually make him more angry. The body may benefit from discharging tension, but that could happen from dancing. What's really helpful for your child is that he gets to show you how upset he is, so he feels understood.

When your child is calm, make a list with her of constructive ways to handle emotion, and post it on the refrigerator. Let her do the writing, or add pictures, so she feels some ownership of the list. Model using it yourself when you're mad: *"I'm getting annoyed, so I'm checking our MAD list. Oh, I think I'll put on some music and dance out my frustration!"*Here are some ideas to get you started:

* Most kids resist punching the pillows on the couch, which feels artificial to them, but many love having a punching bag to beat up.
* Young children often find it helpful to stomp their feet when they're mad. Don't worry, it's better than kicking their sister or the wall, and over time they will start using words.
* With a child who is a bit older, you can suggest that she draw or write on paper what she is angry about, and then fiercely rip it into tiny pieces.
* Teach her to use her "PAUSE" button by breathing in for four counts through her nose, and then out for eight through her mouth.
* Grab two squishy balls; hand her one, and demonstrate working out annoyance on the squishy ball.
* Put on music and do "an angry dance."
* To keep from hitting, kids can clap their arms around their bodies (so each hand ends up on the opposite shoulder or side) and yell something like "Mom!" or "Stop!"

5. Help your child be aware of her "warning signs."

Once kids are in the full flush of adrenaline and the other "fight or flight" neurotransmitters, they think it's an emergency, and they're fighting for their lives. At that point, managing the angry impulses is almost impossible, and all we can offer kids is a safe haven while the storm sweeps through them. But if you can help your child notice when she's getting annoyed and learn to calm herself, she'll have many fewer tantrums. When she's little, you'll have to know her cues and take preventive action -- offering some snuggle time, or getting her out of the grocery store. As she gets older, you can point out to her

"Sweetie, you're getting upset. We can make this better. Let's all calm down and figure this out together."

6. Set limits on aggression.

Allowing feelings does not mean that we allow destructive actions. Kids should never be allowed to hit others, including their parents. When they do, they are always asking for us to set limits and help them contain their anger. Say *"You can be as mad as you want but I won't let you hit me. I will keep us all safe. You can tell me how mad you are without hurting me."*

Some children really need to struggle against something when they're angry. It's fine to let them struggle against your hands, or even your holding arms, if that's what they want, but take off your glasses, and don't let yourself get hurt.

Similarly, don't let kids break things in their fury. That just adds to their guilt and sense that they're a bad person. Your job is to serve as a safe "container" and "witness" while you listen to your child's upsets.

7. Don't send a child away to "calm down" by herself.

Your goal when your child is angry or upset is to restore a sense of safety, which requires your calm presence. Remember that kids need your love most when they "deserve it least." Instead of a "time out," which gives kids the message that they're all alone with these big, scary feelings, try a "time in," during which you stay with your child and help him move through his feelings. You'll be amazed at how your child begins to show more self control when you adopt this practice, because he feels less helpless and alone.

8. Restore connection.

Your child needs to know that you understand and are there to help. If you know what's going on, acknowledge it:

*"You are so angry that your tower fell."*

If you don't know, say what you see: *"You are crying so hard....I see how upset you are."*

Give explicit permission: *"It's ok, everyone needs to cry (or gets mad, or feels very sad) sometimes. I will stay right here while you show me your sads and mads."* If you can touch him, do so to maintain the connection:*"Here's my hand on your back. You're safe. I'm here."*

If he yells at you to go away, say:

*"You want me to go away. I will step back a bit. I will be right over here when you are ready for a hug. I won't leave you alone with these big feelings."*

9. Do preventive maintenance to help your child work through the emotions that come up daily.

There are a few practices that help your child feel safe and connected, and that help her work through the emotional challenges that all children encounter in daily life. Those practices are:

* Respond to everything the child expresses with empathy and respect, even when you set limits. (You won't be able to be empathic 24/7. Just work on increasing your ratio.)
* Spend a minimum of 15 minutes one-on-one with each child daily, just connecting and enjoying the child.
* Use routines so your child knows what to expect, which helps kids feel safer.
* Accept all the emotions your child expresses, and make it safe for him to cry when he needs to.
* Give your child control of her choices when possible.
* Make sure that each child gets a daily chance to belly-laugh for at least 10 minutes, preferably by being physically active with him.
* 10. Help your child develop emotional intelligence.
* Kids who are comfortable with their feelings manage their anger constructively. There's a whole section on this website on [emotional intelligence](http://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/emotionally-intelligent-child).
* Some kids, unfortunately, don't feel safe expressing their uncomfortable feelings. Sometimes they have parents who discount or even ridicule their fears or disappointments. Sometimes they've been sent to their rooms to "calm down" and never received the help they needed to handle their upsets. Sometimes the pain or grief just feels too overwhelming. They try hard to repress their fears, jealousies, and anxieties, but repressed feelings have a way of popping out unmodulated, as when an otherwise loving preschooler suddenly hits the baby. These kids live in fear of their feelings. To fend off this reservoir of fear, grief, or other pain, these kids get angry -- and they stay angry. When this happens, a child may benefit from professional help.

*How do you know when your child needs help handling anger? Look for these ten signs.*

* She can't control her aggressive impulses and hits people (other than siblings), past the age of five.
* Frequent explosive outbursts, indicating that he is carrying a full 'tank" of anger and other upsets, that's always ready to spill over.
* She is constantly reflexively oppositional (and she isn't two years old.)
* He doesn't acknowledge his role in creating the situation, instead feeling constantly victimized and "picked on."
* She frequently loses friends, alienates adults, or is otherwise embroiled in interpersonal conflict.
* He seems preoccupied with revenge.
* She threatens to hurts herself physically (or actually does so).
* He damages property regularly.
* She repeatedly expresses hatred toward herself or someone else.
* He hurts smaller children or animals.

When a child has "anger management issues" it means that he is terrified of those pent-up feelings under the anger (fear, hurt, grief.) To defend against those vulnerable feelings that he thinks will destroy him, he hardens his heart and clings to the anger as a defense. That's when kids develop a chip on their shoulder. They seem to be trying to drive you away, but it's really a cry for help.

Begin by using the ideas in this article to support your child. Start talking about emotions in your home, using the books below as a starting place to begin a discussion. If you don't feel like things are changing after a few months of good effort, don't hesitate to seek professional help. An experienced therapist can help the child work through those deeper feelings, and develop more ability to manage his emotions. But in general, I recommend that parents go into counseling along with their child. You don't want your child to feel that he's broken so you're taking him to get "fixed." You want everyone

in the family to learn how to communicate better, so everyone feels loved and gets their needs met. A good therapist who will meet with you and your child together can help you do that.

Recommended Books for Kids on handling anger:

PLEASE NOTE: These books are Amazon links with photos of the books. If you are not seeing them on your page, it may be that your browser is not picking them up. Please try a different browser. Enjoy!



