

# RESPONSES THAT REDUCE ANGER

Anger understandably occurs when a person of any age is overpowered. Because young people have so many rules to learn, they are likely to be overpowered many times a day. Thinking that children should accept your decisions without comment will only make you frustrated and do little to resolve the situation. Although it is natural for children to get angry with parents, they do need to express their feelings in a productive way. Understand that refusing to allow children to express any anger at all is just as destructive as allowing them to vent it however they please.

## UNDERSTAND AND FEED BACK FEELINGS

Labeling and feeding back feelings are the first steps in teaching children how to express distress without acting out inappropriately.<sup>1</sup> Making at least three statements that rephrase, understand, validate, or encourage children to express feelings can reduce anger. For example:

- You don't like it when I correct you. I see you are really mad. You can stomp your foot (scream in this pillow, smash this can, draw a picture, give me a mean look) to show me how mad you are. I know it's hard to have to learn so many rules.
- I know you don't like being on this restriction until your grades improve. It must tear your heart out not to get to talk to your friends every night. For a while, you may be very upset with me because I am holding firm.

Postpone talking to children if you are too angry to listen and feedback feelings. Tell them, "I'm too upset for talking right now. We'll discuss this as soon as we've both cooled down." Anger can take many forms. You can use other responses in addition to the above, depending on the way hostility is being expressed:

1. Arguments: When children are angry, you may be tempted to explain why their feelings are unjustified or to defend your actions. This is generally an undesirable course of action because it provokes arguments and creates power struggles. Even if children don't get their way, they have reduced you to their level. Remember that children often have difficulty understanding consequences and rules. Therefore, the best thing to do is to remain firm and avoid arguing by:
  - Repeating your decision like a broken record when feeding back feelings does not end arguments—"Nevertheless . . .", "Regardless . . ." and walk away.
  - Not expressing your point unless your child truly wants to understand it. State the feeling behind your reason. It is difficult to argue with emotions—"I worry when you go that far from the house." Your child can disagree with you if you say "You're too young to go that far."
2. Temper tantrums and explosions: Even when you feed back children's feelings and refuse to argue, anger can escalate into a full-blown tantrum. Several strategies can be used when this happens. Find the one that works best for your child:
  - Ignore the tantrum as though it is not happening or calmly watch without talking.
  - Place the child in another room or leave the room yourself until the child can talk calmly.
  - Join the tantrum. Lie down next to the child and mirror the outburst.

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<sup>1</sup> Several books elaborate on skills that improve communication with children: *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon, 1980). *The Explosive Child* by Ross Green (HarperCollins, 1998) is especially important reading for parents whose children have anger problems.

- Physically restrain a child who is hurting self or others or is being destructive. It helps to hold a small child's hands or feet in such a way that he or she can push without hurting you.
  - Call the authorities if older children hit. When children go to this extreme, they are asking for outside intervention.
  - If children destroy anything, they can replace it or give up something of their own.
  - Withhold privileges until the issue causing the tantrum has been calmly discussed.
3. Hitting or biting: When people are mad, their natural inclination is to strike out. Very young children have not yet learned to contain this energy. Toddlers who hit or bite can have their hands or mouths firmly held while being told "Hitting (biting) hurts people." Maintain this position until the toddler clearly is upset and then let go to see if he or she can handle the frustration without striking out. If not, repeat the procedure. Older children who hit can be made to copy statutes on domestic violence.
4. Fighting: Anger often results from conflicts of interest with siblings. As soon as your children's bickering becomes annoying, separate them until they are calm enough to follow the three steps for conflict resolution:
- Each child makes three statements beginning with, "I want . . ." "I feel . . ." "I want/feel because . . ."
  - Each child reverses roles and accurately repeats or paraphrases what the other has said.
  - Together, the children generate three possible solutions to the conflict and choose the best idea.

Initially, children may need guidance, but eventually, they should be able to follow the steps independently. Keep a set of *Conflict Resolutions* Steps posted and simply tell them to go to the "conflict board" until they can reach an agreement. Reward both children when they reach an agreement.

5. Name-calling is often the forerunner of fights. Using reverse psychology can markedly reduce this. Make a rule that anyone who gets called a name or is hit without striking back receives a "victim's compensation point" or reward. These points can add up to earn snacks or prize money. This creates an incentive for children to adopt a totally different viewpoint about being called names. They can thank their adversaries for saying or doing mean things that help them earn points. If the parent doesn't hear or see the conflict, a child can still earn points by telling the parent something that he said to "thank" the one who tried to start the fight. To avoid tattling, the child needs to report what he or she did to help, not what the other person did to cause hurt.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ideas in *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies* by Kate Cohen-Posey (Rainbow Books, 1995) help children deal with name-calling and reduce fighting.