

Everyone gets mad

"Hi Dylan. How was school today?" "All right," says Dylan, but the way he throws his bag into the car says something different. Dylan gets into the car, roughly pulls off his jacket and manages to elbow his younger brother. "Can't you be more careful Dylan?" his mother says. No answer.

Later at home Dylan gets really angry when he finds a favourite toy missing from his shelf. Then when he is asked to turn off the television and help get things ready for dinner, he ignores his mother's request. When she asks again, he storms off angrily into his bedroom and slams the door.

Over dinner Dylan's mum asks him, "What's up?" Dylan just shrugs, "Nothing."

It's easy to see that Dylan is pretty angry about something, but it's hard to tell what it's about. Did something happen at school? Is he worried about the soccer game coming up on the weekend?

Helping children learn to manage anger

Children's angry behaviour is often difficult to deal with because it stirs up feelings of anger and annoyance in others. It can also frustrate parents and carers when anger is used to push them away. If you were Dylan's mum how would you feel? Annoyed? Frustrated? Tense? Angry?

Everyone feels angry at times. Parents and carers can help children learn how to cope with anger in positive ways by teaching them to be aware of feelings, to find appropriate, safe ways to express them, and to identify and solve the problems or frustrations that lead to angry feelings.

Learning skills for understanding and dealing with anger will make it easier for children to solve problems, get help when needed and be more relaxed around others.



How parents and carers can help

Be aware of feelings

Children need to learn that having angry feelings is normal and okay, but that reacting aggressively towards others when they're angry is not. Adults can help children become aware of feeling annoyed, frustrated, angry or furious by naming feelings. Learning to say, "I'm feeling angry," or "I'm really frustrated," gives children a way to separate feeling angry from how they react.

Time to talk

Talking to Dylan about what has put him in an angry mood will help him see that feelings have causes and that solutions can be found. Once you find out what he was angry about you can help him think up better ways to handle the problem.

This kind of conversation doesn't work while he is really angry. Sometimes it must wait until later. Children often find it easier to talk in informal situations where they feel less pressure. Find a relaxed time to talk to children about feelings. Asking, "What makes you angry?" can be a good way of starting a conversation about anger.

Find alternatives

Getting children to think through a difficult situation helps them develop problem-solving skills. Asking, "Is that what you wanted to happen?" or "What else could you have tried?" encourages children's helpful thinking. Thinking of alternative solutions helps children plan different ways of reacting next time. Be sure to praise their efforts.



Have ways to calm down

When emotions are strong, it is easy to act without thinking. Encourage your child to take control and allow time for the emotions to subside. Walking away, using a quiet spot to think, or doing something else like riding a bike or listening to music are all activities that can assist in reducing strong emotions.

'Cool-down' steps to teach children

- 1 Recognise that you are angry
 - Notice the body signals that mean you're angry (eg getting hot, racing heart, tense muscles)
 - Give a number from one to 10 to show how angry you are
- 2 Cool down your body
 - Breathe slowly
 - Take time-out in a quiet place
 - Go for a walk, do something physical
 - Draw how you feel
- 3 Use coping self-talk
 - "It's okay. I can handle this."
- 4 Try to solve the problem
 - Talk to someone who is a good listener
 - Plan what to do next time

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The experience of anger

Feeling angry involves changes within the body and also in thinking. Muscles tense and there is a burst of energy as the heart speeds up, blood pressure rises and breathing becomes faster. These changes can lead to having a flushed or red face and to feeling hot. Symptoms of anger like these are part of the 'fight or flight response' that helps to prepare the body for danger.

Thoughts also play a big part in anger. Angry thinking can trigger angry feelings and make them last longer, so learning to understand and change thinking patterns is very important for managing anger. With help from adults children can develop skills for recognising and changing angry thinking.

What do children get angry about?

Angry feelings are usually the result of being frustrated while trying to reach a goal. Researchers have found that children feel angry (rather than sad) when they believe that the negative situation they are concerned about can or should be changed.

Different kinds of situations can lead to angry feelings in children. Some of the most common situations are listed in the table below.

Kind of situation

Possessions

Physical aggression

Verbal aggression

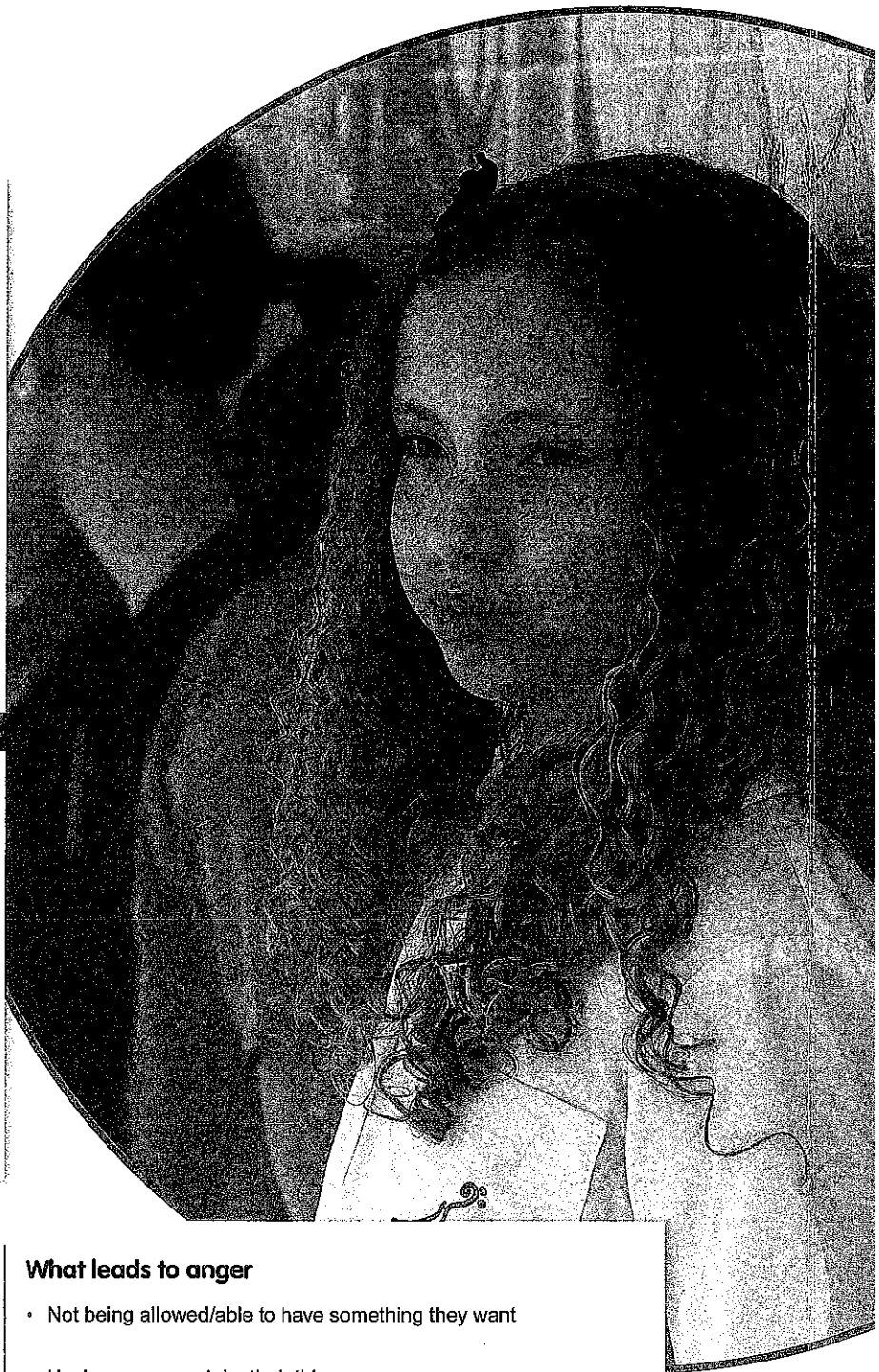
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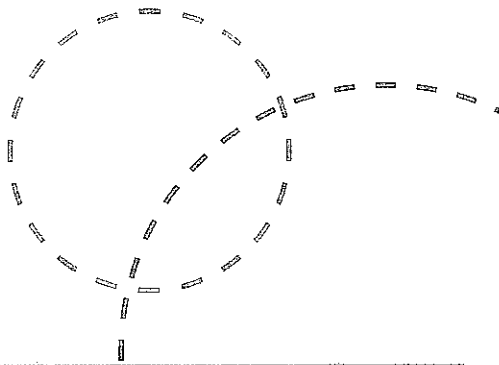
Rejection

Unmet emotional needs

What leads to anger

- Not being allowed/able to have something they want
- Having someone take their things
- Being hit, kicked, punched, etc
- Having others (children or adults) speak to them aggressively
- Being required or forced to do something they don't want to
- Being excluded from social games
- Being rejected by other children
- Feeling unsafe
- Feeling uncared for





Key points for helping children learn to manage anger

For children to learn to manage anger effectively they need adult support and guidance.

They need to know that anger is a normal human emotion and that there are acceptable and safe ways of expressing it. They need to feel understood and supported rather than judged or blamed for feeling angry.

Be a model for children

Children learn effective ways of managing anger from seeing adults manage their anger effectively. Show them how you use appropriate ways to tell others you are angry and sort out problems.

Discuss feelings

Using words to discuss anger, frustration, annoyance, irritation, etcetera helps children learn that having angry feelings is normal and is something that can be talked about. This helps children understand feelings and feel understood. It also makes it easier for them to recognise that some ways of reacting to anger are okay and others are not.

Anticipate and prepare

Parents, carers and school staff can help children manage their anger by identifying situations that often trigger angry responses and being prepared to offer support as early as possible. This may include getting children engaged in activities that will take them away from a situation they find stressful. It may involve planning with an individual child in advance how he or she can handle a challenging situation.

Use positive discipline

Providing specific praise when children manage their anger well supports their learning. Setting clear rules and predictable consequences for children's behaviour helps them know what you expect. When limits are made clear and praise is provided for appropriate behaviour children find it easier to develop the self-discipline they need to manage anger effectively. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on effective discipline.

Manage angry feelings

Children need skills to help them cool down their anger. Simple relaxation techniques involving deep breathing, calming strategies (eg counting to 10) and coping self-talk are very useful for helping children lower the temperature of their anger. For some children it may be especially beneficial to have a special place for quiet time where they can get away from anger triggers while they cool down. It is important to note that the physical symptoms of anger can take a long time to return to normal. Having a cool down strategy helps children learn the steps to manage their angry feelings.

Solve problems

Once they have calmed down, thinking through the situation that made them angry can help children to come up with other ways of approaching it. Parents, carers and school staff can support children's skills for solving problems by asking questions that help children think things through. Questions to ask include:

- What happened?
- How did you feel and react?
- How did the other person feel and react?
- What happened then?
- What could you have done differently?
- What could you do differently next time?

Adults may need to help children work through the steps by giving examples and suggestions for them to think through. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on decision-making.

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