

Anger

About anger

We all feel angry at times. Anger is an important emotion, and when we are afraid it can help make us less vulnerable and able to 'survive' the situation. Therefore, if a child or young person feels angry this is not a problem in itself. The important thing is how this anger is expressed and dealt with. It is only when anger is ignored or not expressed properly that it can become a problem. Feelings of anger can range from mild irritation to fully blown rages, verbal outbursts and physical violence.

It is important that children and young people learn to express their anger constructively and feel heard, because if the anger is ignored it can build up inside and may lead to them expressing it in disruptive behaviour or turning their frustration on themselves in the form of self-harm.

When we are angry our bodies release certain stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones prepare our body and mind to be aggressive or escape a situation, often referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. Feeling angry a lot or for a long time means that the body has to cope with a lot of these hormones, which can lead to health problems and emotional problems:

Health

- It can lead to digestive problems, such as ulcers, heartburn, gastritis and irritable bowel syndrome.
- It can also have negative effects on our hearts, and increase blood pressure.
- It can generally weaken the immune system, making us more likely to become ill.
- It can lead to sleep problems.
- It can also lead to muscle tension, aches and pains and headaches.

Emotional

- Feeling angry a lot can lead to feeling sad and depressed, especially if the anger is not expressed and is kept all bottled up.
- Feeling guilty or embarrassed about inappropriate expressions of anger can lead to loss of confidence and self-worth.
- It can lead to addictions, such as alcohol, tobacco and even drug abuse.
- It can make us intolerant of others and damage our relationships with others.
- It can also lead to violent behaviour. This can be aimed at others, for instance bullying or other socially disruptive behaviour, or it can be aimed at oneself in the form of self-harming behaviours.

Key Points

- Feeling angry is not a bad thing; it is completely natural and we all get angry at times.
- Young people tend to get angry when they are feeling stressed, frightened, frustrated, or treated unfairly.
- Feeling angry for a long time is sometimes a result of deeper problems or past experiences, such as losing a loved one or abuse.
- The anger itself is often not the problem, but what is important is how it is dealt with and how it is expressed.

Things to think about

Anger is a very common emotion that everyone experiences at times. Children and young people tend to get angry when they are stressed, frustrated, or feel that something is unfair. Feeling angry at times is as natural as feeling happy and sad, and if it happens occasionally it is not a bad thing at all. We tend to see anger as a bad thing, or even fear it, because of the occasional explosive nature of it. Many people try to avoid anger altogether, but this can lead to more problems further down the line.

Children and young people tend to experience anger for the same reasons that adults do. They may have been annoyed by something in the present and are reacting to it immediately. It could also be that they were treated badly in the past and are still feeling angry about that, and end up carrying a lot of 'bottled up' anger around with them.

Think about the following which may have led to the child getting angry:

- Is the child being bullied?
- Are they struggling at school?
- Are they unable to express themselves verbally? Rages often occur in children or young people who have difficulty in expressing their views or feelings about something in words.
- Are there any issues at home, e.g. are their parents very strict; is there any conflict between their parents?
- Have they recently experienced a loss or bereavement?

Think about yourself

Anger is something that we all have experienced at some time in our lives. Everyone knows what it feels like to be angry or to experience someone else's anger. These experiences will colour our own response to a young person who is angry, for example if we have experienced anger turning to violence we may respond fearfully or defensively. This may cause you to respond with an angry reaction yourself or to avoid angry situations. Being aware of our own attitudes towards anger is very important in responding helpfully, so that we do not make negative assumptions and make the situation worse.

For more advice, see section on being aware of yourself and your own response.

What you can do

When they are angry

- Try to lead by example by remaining calm. As hard as this may be, try to be assertive but do not shout or lose your own temper, rather show the child/young person that you can handle their angry feelings without becoming aggressive.
- Try explaining the situation to them. Often children and young people feel angry because they are feeling a lack of control, and often a misunderstanding or feeling ignored or belittled can be the root of their anger.
- If possible defuse the situation by offering them reasonable choices. This can be as simple as, "We will have to complete this task but how do you think we should approach it" or "Do you want to get some air and come back to this in a few minutes?". This also makes them feel more in control and increases their sense of fairness and their confidence without allowing them to have their own way.
- If there are other people around it can make it more difficult for the child or young person to be seen to back down because of the fear of losing their dignity or the respect of friends. If they are not calming down then encourage them to go to a more private space or ask others to leave you to talk to the young person on their own. You should always consider any risks when on your own with an angry person.
- Sometimes young people will behave in a manner that is unacceptable, for example refusing to do as they are told or having a tantrum. It is therefore important to have sanctions you can bring to bear. These sanctions should be viewed as a learning experience. They should be consistently enforced; they should be seen as being fair. Only threaten and use sanctions when absolutely necessary and only those that you can reasonably enforce.
- Try to be very clear about how you expect them to behave and make sure that they understand the consequences of not co-operating. Sanctions should be a predictable consequence of an unwanted behaviour. As such they should be something that the child or young person can learn from.
- A second chance opportunity should be available to the child, for example, if 'time out' is used the length of time should be roughly a minute for every year of the child's life. In other words, if the child is aged 5 then the time out should be approximately five minutes. They should then get a second chance to behave better. Being sent to their room for the remainder of the day or grounded for a week does not encourage a child to do better as they may feel their chance to reform has already gone.

Once they have calmed down

- Explain to the child or young person that anger is not a bad emotion. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Nobody feels angry for no reason, but it can often be difficult to figure out why we get angry. Try to help them explore their anger so that you can both understand it better. This can also help make them feel less frustrated and you understand and respect them. For more information, see section on counselling techniques.
- Explain the process of anger and how it affects the emotions and body (see About anger section above).

- Try to pinpoint what triggers their anger and the reasons for feeling the way they do. Once you have identified the triggers and the reasons behind their anger you can then help them to develop different ways of coping and dealing with these situations.
- Try to reduce any external stressors on the child or young person, for example bullying.
- Encourage and motivate them with rewards for expressing or controlling anger in better ways. For more information, see section on behavioural techniques.
- Coach the child/young person in ways of being respectfully assertive when they disagree with someone else's opinion or behaviour. Role playing alternative ways of being respectfully assertive in different situations can be a useful learning experience. This can be done on a one to one or with a group of young people in the form of play acting and games.
- Praise and encourage them to notice situations in which they have handled their anger well or have expressed it effectively and calmly. This will also build confidence, reduce frustration and will make it more likely that they will repeat the more useful behaviour. For more information, see section on solution-focused techniques.
- Coach the young person in ways of reducing tension for example exercise and relaxation techniques.

...because of the bullying, [child] was getting really angry and withdrawn. The input from [worker] stopped him from being so angry, he can laugh now and play games. With this worker he was able to speak about bullying and how he felt, he learned how to express himself"

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What not to do

- Don't lose your own temper.
- Don't threaten sanctions that are unreasonable or you are unable to carry out.
- Don't use physical restraint except to protect the child or young person or others from serious harm.
- Don't get into arguments. The young person is likely to become more frustrated and angry if they are losing the argument.
- Don't make fun of them as this is likely to make them feel humiliated and more frustrated and angry.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- When the anger occurs together with other worrying behaviours or psychological problems, e.g. confusion or self-harming behaviours.
- If their anger is severe, recurrent and puts them or other people at serious risk of injury.
- If your attempts to help have uncovered issues that you are inexperienced in dealing with, e.g. sexual abuse.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.