

Children's Anger: Triggers and Solutions for Coping

Many different factors come in to play when you examine anger:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)

And so, we'll look at:

- 1) What are common triggers for your child's anger?
- 2) What are some methods you can teach your child to use to express his/her anger in a healthy manner?
- 3) How can we, as parents, be good role models in expressing anger.

Children's Anger: Nine Possible Triggers and Solutions for Coping

When your child gets angry, I'd like you to take a step back and try to figure out what may have triggered the angry outburst. Many times, believe it or not, there may be a good explanation.

I'd like you to keep track for one week of what triggers set off your child's anger? There's a sheet called "Adult Analysis of a Child's Anger" on page 59 that you can use to help you.

Many times you'll see a pattern and it will make it easier to try and strategize how you can either work to prevent the meltdown or find ways to help your child cope.

We're going to look at nine common triggers for a child's anger outbursts and possible solutions to help your child calm down. The solutions may also provide ways to prevent the next meltdown.

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1. **Time of Day**- Many children express more anger between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. than any other time. Document what time of day is most troubling for your child.

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

2. **Abrupt Changes**- Children crave routine and structure. They don't like curve balls.

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

3. **Too much stimulation**- Children may get over-stimulated from too many activities in one day or too much of one activity at a time.

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

4. **Overtired**- Most children need 10-12 hours of sleep a day to function best.

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)

5. **Hurt Feelings**

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

6. Jealous Feelings

Possible Solution:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

7. Child Doesn't Get Own Way

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

8. **Not Sharing**- This is a skill that takes years to master. Hang in there!

Possible Solutions:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

9. Too Much Energy

Possible Solution:

- 1)

So there we have 9 possible triggers and solutions for a child's anger, but there are also some **developmental issues at play.**

For preschool children some of those issues are; *

- Trying to gain mastery over his body
- Desire to be in control and do things for herself, yet frustration that she can't
- Desire to have it NOW
- Having few words to express his feelings
- Being too young to do certain things
- Parents not understanding her
- Parents taking over instead of asking if the child wants help?

Anger Triggers for School-Aged Children: *

- Trying to belong
- Failing to achieve
- Criticism
- Jealousy
- Being too young to do certain things
- Being over-scheduled
- Feeling his rights have been infringed

Anger Triggers for Teens: *

- Powerful need to belong
- Want to seem in control
- Peer pressure may cause anxiety
- Worry she won't be able to do what all her friends are doing
- Importance of looking and acting the same as peers
- Trying to find status
- Worries of whether he's lovable
- Feelings of physical inadequacy
- Need for independence

For all children and adults, the source of anger may not really be anger at all, but:

- 1) Fear
- 2) Failure
- 3) Low self-esteem
- 4) Boredom
- 5) Confusion
- 6) Sadness
- 7) Rejection
- 8) Loneliness
- 9) Hurt
- 10) Loss

* Excerpts from "Taming the Dragon in Your Child," Meg Eastman, Ph.D., with Sydney Craft Rozen.

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HOW ANGER WORKS

Something Happens	Thought	Feeling	Physical Response
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Something happens. I.e. Someone yells at you.
Your brain provides a thought. "How dare she! She has no right to do that to me!"
A feeling results. "I'm Angry!"
Your body responds (Fight or flight response. A physiological response occurs. Palms sweat. Heart races. Teeth grind. Fists clench. Face reddens. Stomach tightens.)

The important part of this equation that I want you to focus on is that your thoughts and your child's thoughts control the outcome of this event. You are in control of how this event unfolds, by controlling your thoughts after an event occurs.

Let's look at an alternative:

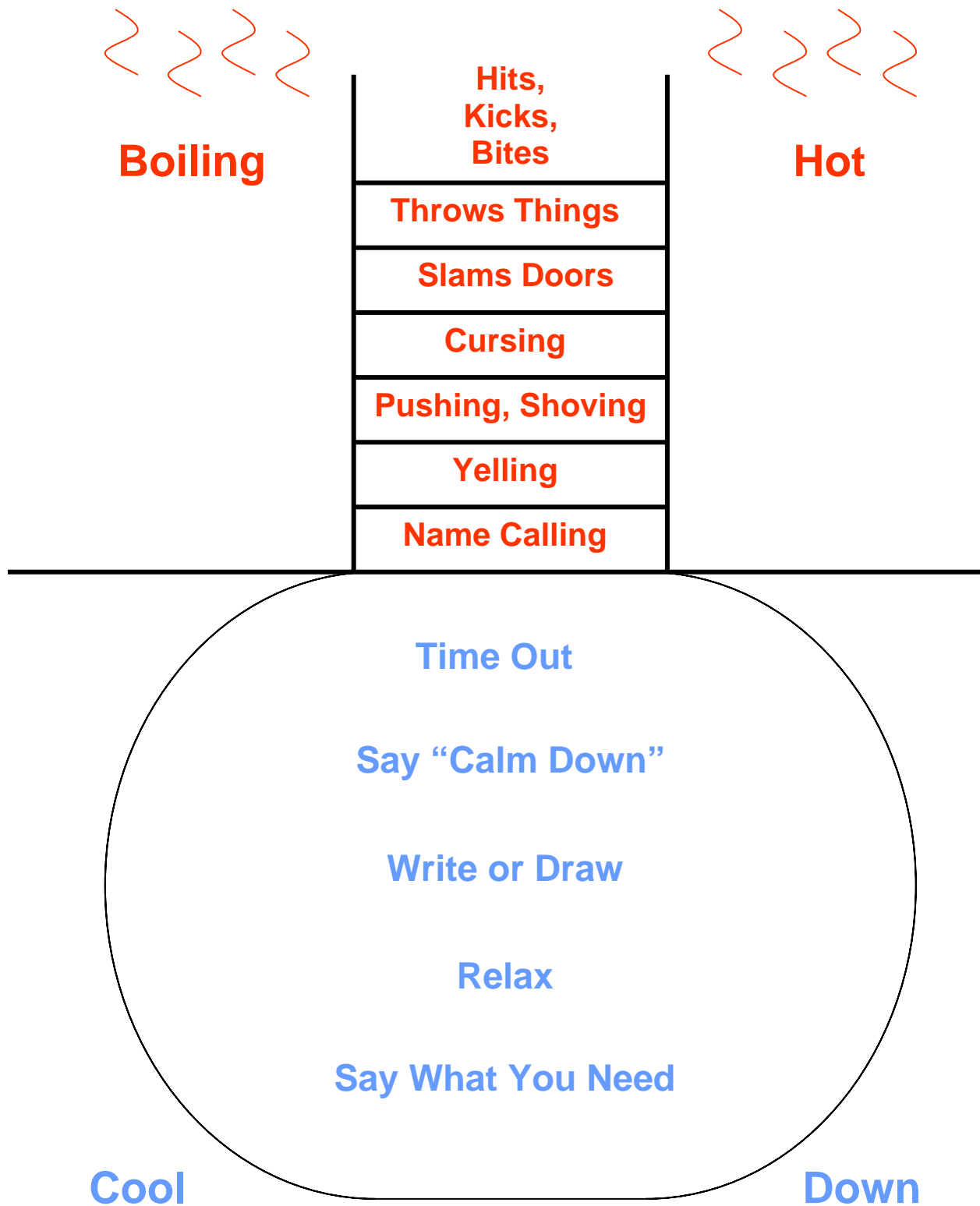
Something happens. i.e. Someone yells at you.
Your brain provides a thought. "She must be in a bad mood today! I wonder what's wrong?"
A feeling results. Empathy. Sympathy. Indifference.
Your body responds (??)

The whole outcome of this scenario will be different because your thought was different!

So, the very good news is that **You** control your anger, not the situation, not the kids. You can decide whether to get angry or not and to what degree! So can your child.

I've used the top half of a thermometer to illustrate types of anger expression you may not want in your family and then added acceptable ways of expressing anger in the lower half of the thermometer. Feel free to develop your own anger thermometer for use at your house.

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Here are anger reduction methods for both adults and kids that have been proven, with research, to help with anger control:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

So what can you do to help your child cope with anger and all of these underlying feelings?

1. Teach your child _____.
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
2. Look very closely for _____.
 - A.
 - B.
3. You can look at the child and identify _____.

Here are some anger-related words you might use:

Angry, confused, down-in the-dumps, frustrated, humiliated, disappointed, hurt, embarrassed, furious, heartbroken, annoyed, bored, cranky, irritated, mad, miserable, outraged, stressed out, ticked off, worried, jealous, overwhelmed, rageful, stubborn, upset, tense, tired, miffed, quarrelsome, scared, troubled,

Simply state, "You look irritated." Wait for a response to see if you're right and even if you're not, you're still helping your child by trying to understand her feelings.

Or if your child is losing it, you can say: "You look really, really, mad. Wow! You're really mad now. I can see how mad you are."

Another technique I've used is to just use very short phrases like "Want toy. Mad." If a young child has already lost it, you may choose to stay near.

4. A very critical step is to explore with your child during a quiet time _____.

5. You can even create a _____.

Options a Child Can Use to Calm Down:

- Taking deep breaths. Pretend that there is a balloon in his tummy that he has to blow up. Actually use a balloon to illustrate. The technique you want to have him use is to breathe in through his nose and breathe out through his mouth, actually moving his diaphragm.
- Breathe in "cool" colors and breathe out "hot" color
- Repeating "CHILL" over and over
- Counting to 12, 20 or 100!
- Talking about her feelings
- Asking for help
- Taking a bath or shower
- Jump roping
- Going outside
- Going for a walk
- Coloring
- Writing about the anger i.e. My MAD diary
- Throwing a nerf ball
- Dancing
- Listening to music, keep a favorite CD in the bag
- Ripping newspapers
- Playing an instrument
- Doing something to make him laugh
- Pretending to be a turtle
- Hug a stuffed animal, hold her blankie
- Play with GAK
- Popping bubble wrap
- Act out his anger with puppets or dolls
- Call a friend

So, the 5-Step Process is to:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

What to do with kids who are intense, quick to anger, explosive, have tantrums:

Parental Don'ts:

- 1) Give in to what the child wants, s/he will only learn that that works!
- 2) Lecture, shame the child
- 3) Throw your own tantrum
- 4) Let the tantrum go on for more than 5 minutes

Steps you want to take are to:

- 1) Find a relaxing place the child can go where s/he can't hurt someone, or him/herself.
- 2) Ignore the child.
- 3) Set a time limit for ignoring.
- 4) Say "It's time to calm down now. That's enough. Let's take some deep breaths." You can even set a time limit on how many minutes until the child should be calm.
- 5) Hold the child if you like.
- 6) Try to understand what might be going on. "You were really, really mad. Help me understand..."

Some kids are very intense and it may take 100s of positive, healthy, limit-setting interactions before your child can calm down and express anger in a healthy way.

What about hitting?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)

Summary: Steps to take to help your child cope with his/her anger.

- 1) Learn what triggers your child's anger.
- 2) Teach your child a feelings vocabulary.
- 3) Develop house rules about acceptable and unacceptable forms of anger expression.
- 4) Identify the physical precursors to your child's anger.
- 5) Develop relaxation methods with them.
- 6) Coach your child to use the anger reduction methods.
- 7) Recognize that this may take 100s of repetitions before your child remembers to do this on their own. Persevere!

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Adult Analysis of Child's Anger

Time of Day

Who was Involved?

What Happened Right
Before the Blow-Up?

Warning Signs/
Body Language of Child

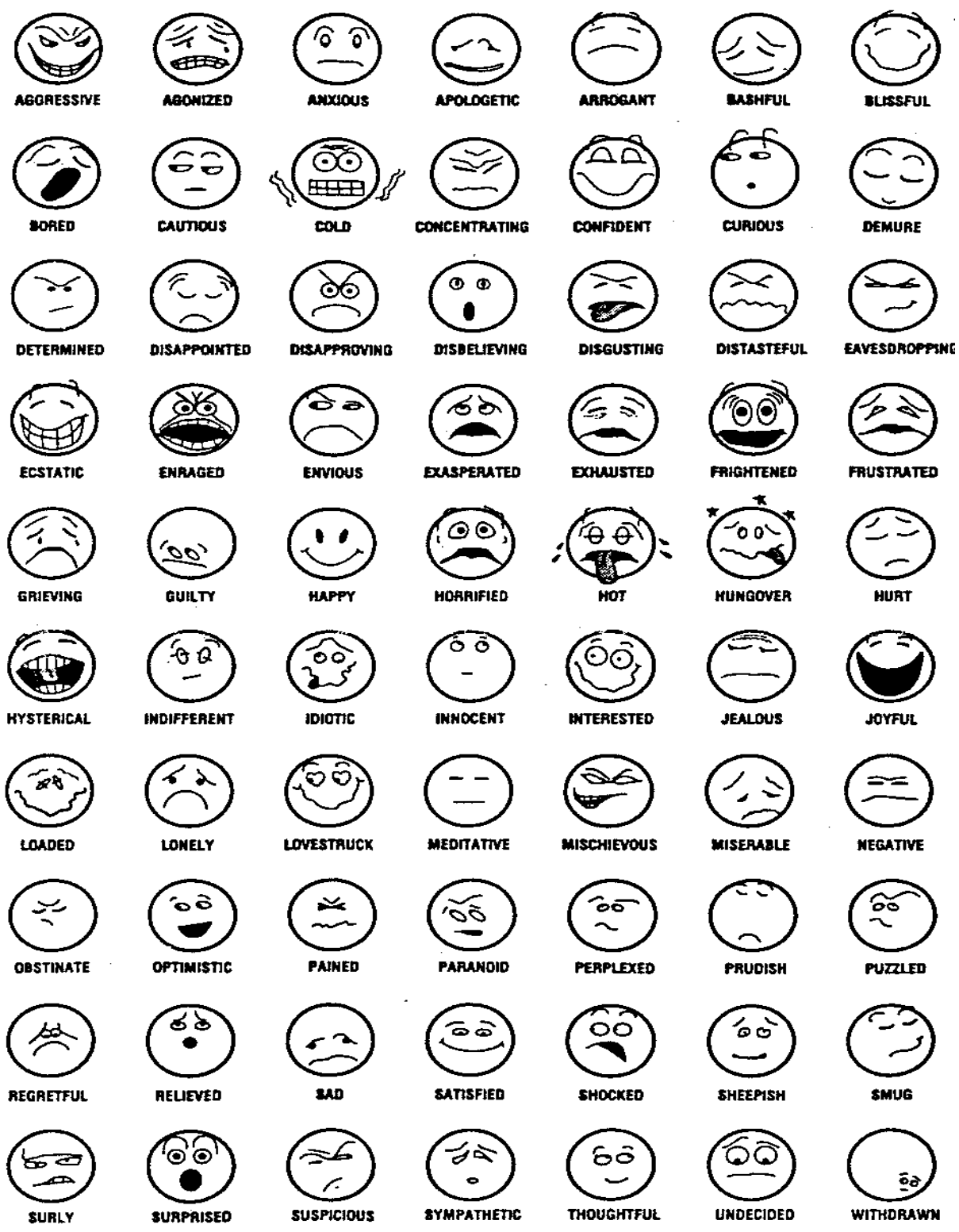
What was said?

How did it Escalate? I.e. Peaceful vs. Fighting Words

Underlying Feeling/Reason? (i.e. rejection, fear, boredom, confusion, sadness, loneliness, hurt, disrespected, an unmet need)

What Could I Have Done to Prevent or to Intercede?

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Sad Mad Glad Hurt Ashamed Afraid

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Your Anger

We have two objectives now: To learn more about your own anger and select methods that you'll use to express your own anger in a healthy way.

Some of us:

- Avoid conflict at all cost
- Are passive/aggressive
- Explode
- Say or do hurtful things

I mentioned that there are many different factors that come in to play when you examine anger. Please take a few minutes, on your own, to examine how these factors may influence your anger:

- **Family history. How did your mom and dad express anger?**

- **Temperament. What is yours and what is your child's?**

- **Parenting style. Are you more authoritarian, democratic or permissive?**

- **Cultural heritage. What cultural norms impact your anger?**

- **Self-esteem. How is your self-esteem regarding your parenting?**

- **How would you rate your child's self-esteem, overall?**
• _____
- **What's your child's developmental stage?** _____

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The next step is to determine your style of anger expression. Here's a quiz for you to take:

Anger Quiz

Directions: Please answer the following questions by circling the response that sounds most like you.

1. How often do you get mad?
A. 0-2 times a day B. 3-4 times a day C. 5 or more times a day
2. How long does your anger usually last?
A. 30 minutes or longer B. 15-30 minutes C. 5-10 minutes
3. On average, how intense is your anger? (a "1" would be mildly frustrated, while a "10" is boiling over)
A. 1-3 B. 4-7 C. 8-10
4. Do you ever throw objects, slam doors or break things?
A. Yes B. Occasionally C. No
5. How many times a day do you scream or yell?
A. 5 or more B. 3-4 C. 0-2
6. Do you hit others when mad?
A. No B. Rarely C. Sometimes
7. Do you curse or call others names when mad?
A. Yes B. Occasionally C. No
8. Does your anger disturb or hurt your relationship with the other person? i.e. Do you say things that you regret?
A. Often times B. Occasionally C. Never
9. Do you avoid conflict at all costs?
A. No B. Sometimes C. Most of the time
10. Do you give yourself a time-out when you start to lose control?
A. Never B. Sometimes C. All of the time

Anger Quiz Scoring Grid

Instructions: Circle the number of points you scored from each of the answers on page 1. Then add up the total number of points.

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. A. 5 points | B. 10 points | C. 15 points |
| 2. A. 15 points | B. 10 points | C. 5 points |
| 3. A. 5 points | B. 10 points | C. 15 points |
| 4. A. 15 points | B. 10 points | C. 0 points |
| 5. A. 15 points | B. 10 points | C. 5 points |
| 6. A. 0 points | B. 10 points | C. 15 points |
| 7. A. 10 points | B. 5 points | C. 0 points |
| 8. A. 15 points | B. 10 points | C. 0 points |
| 9. A. 0 points | B. 5 points | C. 10 points |
| 10. A. 10 points | B. 5 points | C. 0 points |

Point Total _____

20-55 points – Congratulations! You're able to express anger in a healthy manner, talking issues over in a reasonable way, choosing your words carefully and controlling your physical impulses to lash out. You have excellent control of your anger and have found methods to calm yourself so outbursts that hurt others are rare. You're setting an excellent example for your children that anger is normal and that there are many reasonable ways to express anger. OR, you're stuffing your anger and may be experiencing stress and physical symptoms as a result, which is not healthy. In that case, stating your needs in an assertive manner and learning negotiation and conflict management skills could benefit you.

60-95 points- You have some anger issues that could be improved upon. Outbursts that hurt someone else are not the norm, but likely still leave you with feelings of regret after they occur. Look at the answers where you scored the highest point totals and try to determine when your anger gets out of control. Are there certain people or situations where you lose it? Look at one issue at a time and develop a new strategy for addressing your problem areas.

Also, examine the areas where you cope well and see if those coping mechanisms that you use successfully can be transferred to the problem situation.

100-135 points – Your anger is causing problems with people that you love. It's likely that they're fearful of you when you get angry. While you're busy being Tarzan swinging through the jungle yelling and creating a ruckus, you're not able to productively solve the problem that triggered your anger. You're also setting a poor example for your children of how anger should be expressed. If you don't want your children swearing, hurting others or breaking things, then you need to stop doing them yourself. Examine what your triggers are, learn what your physical cues are and by all means, give yourself a time out to calm down so you can learn to be in control of yourself and your anger.

Here are some key questions you want to examine:

- How often am I getting mad?
- How intense is my anger?
- How am I expressing that anger?

Your child is absorbing all of these spoken and unspoken codes about anger from you and your partner every day. You are your child's teacher. You are the role model that he will emulate.

What is one goal I'll set to improve the way that I express anger?

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According to Matthew McKay and Kim Paleg, who studied parents' anger over a two-year period, about 2/3rds of parents felt angry to the point of shouting and screaming at their kids about 5 times a week. About 50% of parents who start out screaming or yelling end up physically hitting a child in some way.*

In any case, your child is going to mimic what s/he sees and pick up messages, every day, about how to solve conflicts.

So, our goals, therefore should be:

- 1) If there's any aggression or violence in your house by any family member to another, the goal will be to: solve conflicts peacefully.
- 2) If you are explosive, by yelling, cursing or throwing things, the goal will be to learn to calm yourself and find other methods to release your anger.
- 3) If you use words as weapons, the goal will be to use words to solve problems, instead.
- 4) If you are avoidant, the goal will be to learn to express your anger with words when an issue arises.

Let's go back to the anger reduction methods for both adults and kids that have been proven, with research, to help with anger control:

- 1) Give yourself a time out – Take a break, or give your child one!**
- 2) Change your thoughts – Pick a phrase that works for you. i.e. "Calm Down."**
- 3) Keep an anger journal or find a creative outlet for the anger.**
- 4) Use relaxation methods and/or find a healthy physical release for your anger.**
- 5) Be clear and specific with your needs.**

I also want to encourage you to identify the physical symptoms you exhibit when you're getting mad, so you can try to stop your anger from escalating. (i.e. heart races, fists clench, jaw tightens)

How does my body respond when I'm mad?

Let's examine the 5 anger-reducing methods in more detail now.

1. Take a Break.

Any time you feel like you're losing control of your anger and you may say or do things that you'll regret, leave the upsetting situation. I believe it's a sign of strength and courage to give yourself time to think more clearly. You're modeling to your child that "I don't want to act impulsively and I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I'm going to take a break to think about this, so I can make a good decision." What a powerful message you will send to your child.

Will you consider taking a break as an anger reduction strategy?

What barriers might there be for using this method?

How can you remove the barrier(s)?

2. Change Your Thoughts.

According to McKay and Paleg, there are several types of thoughts that commonly trigger a parent's anger*:

- 1) Assumed intent. "He's deliberately trying to annoy me." "He's defying me." "How could he do that to me?!" You feel like this is a personal attack and you take it personally.
- 2) Magnification. I also calling this overgeneralization. "She **Never** listens to me." "She **always** does this!" Look for the words "never" and "always" in your thoughts! They can really get you into trouble.
- 3) Labeling, or name calling. "He's so lazy." "She's so dumb." "He's so bad." These thoughts are going to lead you down an angry path that prevents you from looking just at the incident that's in front of you.

So, how can you change your thoughts?

- 1) Stop. Remove yourself from the situation. Take deep breaths.
- 2) Notice what your trigger thoughts are.
- 3) Calm yourself with your words. Say "chill out."
- 4) Replace the trigger thoughts with more neutral thoughts.
- 5) Say what you need to say.

Let me give you an example. You're making dinner and your children start fighting over what TV show to watch. You think "They always do this to me. I can't make a meal without their constant bickering!"

Let's examine these thoughts!.. "Always"... over generalizing... "Do it to me"... personalizing it. "Constant bickering"... over generalizing and labeling. How do you think you're likely to feel as a result of these thoughts? And are you likely to yell?

So, what you want to do is to give yourself a time out, examine your thoughts and come up with some "cool" thoughts to say to yourself.

So, what are some "cool" thoughts you could think instead?

1. "They can't decide what show to watch..."
2. "They are disagreeing. What options do they have?"

How will you feel as a result of these thoughts? You may still be irritated since you're in the middle of something. But are you likely to get a strong physical response to these thoughts? No. And you're less likely to yell.

3. Find a Creative Outlet.

One idea for cooling down is to keep an anger journal. A sample is on the next page. See if that appeals to you. Would drawing your anger work better for you? Listening to music?

Pick a method you can use to creatively release your anger.

4. Relaxation Options

1. Deep breathing. Breathe in a nice long breath through your nose, lifting your diaphragm. Hold the breath and then release it through your mouth. Continue this pattern. Even one minute of deep breathing will help you calm down.
2. Imagine that you're breathing in cool air. Let it fill your lungs. Blow out the warm air.
3. Imagine that you're breathing in a calm, relaxing color. Imagine that you're releasing the angry color as you exhale.
4. You can also pair deep breathing with words to calm yourself, like "calm down." When you do, you'll be altering the thought patterns that are making you angry and sending soothing messages to your brain and body.

Please pick a breathing method that you will try.

_____.

Please pick a word that you'd like to use to calm yourself.

_____.

Other strategies like taking a walk, calling a friend or listening to music, can also be helpful.

I will try the following tool to release my anger.

_____.

5. Using the Communication Wheel.

This communication wheel has 5 segments. I think... I feel... I see/hear... I want/need... I will... It's a method of communicating that incorporates many ways of being heard and communicating respectfully, no matter what the other person's learning style is.

I recommend that you try using this method of communicating when you have important issues to discuss.

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Communication Wheel



Adapted from: "Couple Communication 1: Talking Together" by Sherod Miller, Elam Nunnally and Daniel Wackman.

So, let's look at the example of the parent who was preparing dinner and the kids started to argue over the TV.

Initially, the parent was thinking: "They always do this to me. I can't make a meal without their constant bickering!"

Remember, how anger works:

Something Happens Thought Feeling Physical Response

The parent first needs to neutralize his/her thoughts: "They can't decide what to watch." Then s/he could use the statements outlined in the communication wheel to say:

"I think you two are arguing over what show to watch. I feel irritated that you can't decide. I hear name calling and yelling and that's not acceptable. I want you to stop arguing now. I will take two minutes to help you two find a good solution."

The whole outcome of this scenario will be different because the parent's thought was different!

So, the very good news is that **You** control your anger, not the situation and not the kids. You can decide whether to get angry or not and to what degree!

So, in summary, here are the steps that you can take as a parent to model healthy anger yourself:

- 8) Learn to identify your own triggers and physical precursors.
- 9) Stop. Remove yourself from situations where you feel yourself losing it. Take deep breaths.
- 10) Notice what your trigger thoughts are.
- 11) Calm yourself with your words. Say "calm down."
- 12) Replace the trigger thoughts with more neutral thoughts.
- 13) Find a creative outlet for your anger and/or a safe physical release.
- 14) Say what you need to say using the communication wheel.

References:

*"When Anger Hurts Your Kids: A Parent's Guide" (New Harbinger Publications)
Matthew McKay, Ph.D. and Kim Paley, Ph.D.
"Couple Communication 1 Talking Together" Sherod Miller, Elam Nunnally, Daniel Wackman.

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Anger Journal

What happened?

What did I do?

How angry was I?

Frustrated

Mad

Outraged!

How did the other person feel?

How do I feel now?

What trigger thoughts may have escalated my anger?

What could I do differently next time? Take a time out? Do deep breathing? Repeat calming words? Find a way to get my anger out peacefully?

Do I need to make amends with the person? If yes, what will I do?

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