



# Understanding and responding to anger

Aberdeenshire Educational Psychology Service May 2020



## Anger is normal

Everyone can feel angry at times. Anger can be a useful emotion as it can help us to know that something is wrong. It can make us feel strong, help protect us in frightening situations and be helpful in problem solving. If anger is expressed in a healthy way then it can contribute to learning and change difficult situations.



## Anger at different ages

Children and young people can show anger in different ways as they grow up. As toddlers, children are starting to become more independent but sometimes haven't fully developed the skills for the things that they are wanting to do. They can show their frustration through tantrums, kicking and screaming. This is developmentally normal.

School aged children are learning many different things. They will be learning academically, socially and emotionally. Children may start to compare themselves to others and feel the need to create and belong to friendship groups. At times, friendships can be hard for all children, and insecure friendships can lead to unhappiness and frustration which could be displayed in angry behaviours. Children may be finding learning tricky at school, experiencing sibling rivalry or communication difficulties which can lead to frustration.

During adolescence, young people are developing new types of independence and are also developing their identity. Friendships become very important, feeling accepted and having a sense of belonging is key. Adolescents can become particularly sensitive. Along with puberty, which creates hormonal and brain changes, and creating their own identity, this age group can experience increased feelings of anger.

There are also events which affect all age groups that can, at times, contribute to feelings of anger, including: bereavement, divorce, bullying and experiencing significant change.



**Anger is a normal, natural, understandable and valid emotional response to certain situations.** Often as parents or professionals we tend to use distraction or dismiss strong difficult emotions when we see them in our kids. We are afraid that talking about feeling angry will make the feeling bigger. **If we do not connect with, notice, and talk about how we think our kids are feeling this leads to them feeling confused.** They have a feeling, they do not know what to call it or how to deal with it. They become more overwhelmed and the feeling becomes scary for them. **Helping kids to understand their feelings, to notice them and find ways to express them which do not hurt themselves or others is key.** We want them to be able to say "I feel angry because.....I am going to try..."

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## The Anger Iceberg: anger is a signal of need

It can be useful to look at anger as an iceberg, easy to see the angry *behaviour* at the top but difficult to see the *feelings and the reasons* for these which lie underneath and are not visible. **It is helpful to understand that all behaviour is a form of children communicating with us. Try to think 'what are they trying to tell me?'** Children and young people may be unable to explain the emotions or feelings underneath their behaviour. They might be feeling scared, overwhelmed, fearful and out of control. Anger can appear out of the blue and sneak up on us. Often angry behaviour does not come from angry feelings. As adults it is our job to try and help kids make sense of what is going on. It helps when we are able to remain calm and stay with children, accepting their feelings whilst being clear about what behaviours are acceptable. You can use the following phrases to let them know they are still loveable despite their big angry feelings/ behaviour:

**-You are safe**

**-I am right here**

**-I hear you, everybody needs to cry at times**

**-You're telling me to go away, so I will move back a little bit, but I won't leave you alone with these scary feelings**

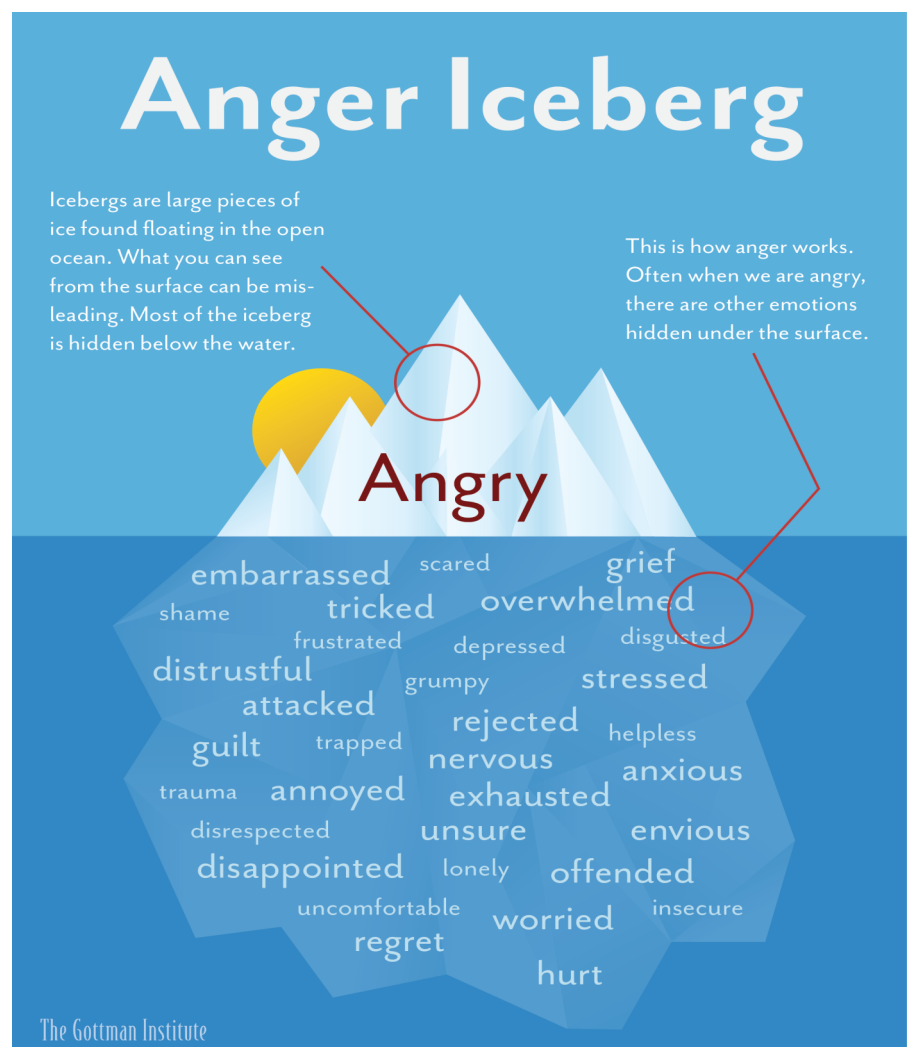
**-When you're ready, I'm right here to listen/hug you/be there for you**

We also need to think about the times when we are feeling angry ourselves and make sure our own needs are being expressed, supported and met. Recognising when our own buttons have been pressed is the first step in feeling anger but remaining the calm grown up.



[Refer to leaflets on Positive role modelling and Relaxation and mindfulness](#)

**When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, its our job to share our calm, not join their chaos –  
L R Knost**





## What happens within the brain? Flipping your lid

The hand model of the brain is a helpful way of showing the different parts of the brain and what happens when we 'flip our lids' or lose control of our emotions. When we sense danger (real or emotional threats), feel angry or scared the lower parts of our brain take over and we experience what is known as a fight, flight or freeze response. When we are in this heightened emotional state our cortical, rational or 'thinking brain' becomes disconnected and stops working. This is why we all do or say things which we do not mean when anger has taken over. Until we calm down and switch off this emergency response we cannot use our thinking brain to control our thoughts and actions.



[Watch video by Jeanette Yotte](#), a good example of how the model can be explained to kids.

[BBC Bitesize video for 7-12 year olds](#) explaining what happens in brain when we feel angry.

## What can I do to help?

It is totally normal for your child to have a huff. It is a way for them to learn how to deal with emotions, test boundaries and express themselves. But as a parent, watching your child have a meltdown can be enough to set you off on one of your own.

We all have moments where our kids press our buttons, we all know that losing our temper and reacting angrily yourself does not help, so what can we do?

- ♦ **Tackle anger together: team up with your child to help them deal with their anger.** This way, you let your child know that the anger is the problem, not them. With younger children, this can be fun and creative. Give anger a name and try drawing it – for example, anger can be a volcano that eventually explodes. How you respond to anger can influence how your child responds to anger. Making it something you tackle together can help you both.
- ♦ If your child is feeling angry but is not sure why, **try and work out why they are angry together.** If they are not ready to talk about it explain that you will be ready to listen when they feel ready.
- ♦ Try not to mirror their anger and get angry yourself. Take a moment yourself to **Stop, breathe and react calmly.** Try to use open body language (get down on their level, look at them, relax your body) and use a calm quiet voice.
- ♦ **Limit questions** (How, what, when?), tell them you know that they are feeling angry and that is understandable/ ok. Wait until they are ready to talk. Some useful phrases and prompts could be:

I love you.            It is okay to be angry... It is not okay to....

I wonder if.....    You are safe.    Remember last time we tried.....

I am sure we can find a solution later            Would you like my help?

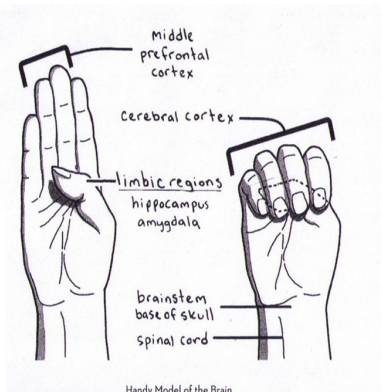
Can we start again/have fresh start?            I am going to...

I will be here when you are ready.            I see that you are upset....

Would you like to try...?

I understand you are feeling angry, that is completely understandable.

We need to think about how you are acting/ behaving/ talking/ expressing it  
Let's find another way to deal with how you are feeling....



*“Do not teach  
your children  
never to be angry;  
teach them **how**  
to be **angry**.”*

Lyman Abbott



## What can I do to help? (continued)

- ♦ **Help them understand the warning signs.** Explain that when we listen to our body we may be able to recognise signs when we might be getting angry and try things to keep us calm.

These include:

Fast breathing	Racing heart
Bubbling in the stomach	Getting distracted/fidgeting
Clenching fists	Feeling warm



- ♦ **NAME IT TO TAME IT: Tell stories to calm big emotions.** Help them understand emotions by giving them a label. Tell the story of what happened so they can make sense of the feelings, the event and move on (see examples in table).



Dan Siegel explains 'Name it to Tame it'


- ♦ **Acknowledge feelings and link them to behaviour**—this helps children understand the range of emotions and they can start to talk about their emotions themselves. Young children may benefit from looking at emotion picture cards, photos of emotional expressions or role play acting out different emotions. Children need to understand emotions first, before they can recognise/label them and begin to self-regulate (control them for themselves).



Refer to leaflet on Emotion Coaching

I see that you are sad and crying because your friend was unkind to you	I'm sorry that happened to you, you must feel very
You seem angry to me	I can see that you get angry when that happens/when I do this
I can tell you are angry... because	I would feel angry if that happened to me
The way you are feeling is making you angry	I would feel angry too
You're angry about...	That would make me angry
You look a bit angry	I understand why you are angry
It's normal to feel angry about that	It's OK to feel angry about that

- ♦ **Help them to come up with ways of responding to angry feelings** and try these out together, for example:

- ⇒ Controlling their breathing and relaxation techniques.  
Refer to leaflet on Relaxation and Mindfulness 
- ⇒ Doing physical activity or sports that they enjoy will release endorphins.
- ⇒ Create a 'calm down' space- a space that they know they can go to on their own or with a grown up to calm down and self-regulate.
- ⇒ Encourage creative ways of channelling their anger- drawing, writing, acting, listening to music.
- ⇒ **Remember different self-soothing, calming activities work for different people so take time to practise and try things out, young children will benefit from you using approaches alongside them to start with.**





## What can I do to help? (continued)



- ♦ **Don't change the usual rules. Keep clear, consistent boundaries and be fair with any consequences.** They may not like it but it will help them feel contained and to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable.

Say

"...the rules are that we..."

"...stay in the playground, the field is far away and I can't see if you are ok"

"...take the ball outside if you want to play with it. Something might get broken if you play with it inside"

"...these are the rules that we have to follow"

"...doing that is not OK"

"...you need to play in a friendly way. Make sure Max has a turn too"

"...be sure to ask first before you borrow something from your friend"



- ♦ If you are really at the end of your tether make sure your child is safe and **take 5 minutes to calm down yourself.** Do what you need to do to de-stress and feel like your calm enough to deal with the situation.
- ♦ **Debrief/after the situation—reconnect, repair or help them to fix any hurt or harm caused,** problem solve together and think about how to handle things differently next time. Say:

Explore feelings that caused the problem	Identify alternatives, help them to find ways to take responsibility/self-regulate	Agree other ways/solutions
<p>"How were you feeling when that happened?"</p> <p>"What did it make you feel like?"</p> <p>"Have you felt that way before?"</p> <p>"What were you trying to achieve by.....?"</p>	<p>"Let's think of what you or I could have done instead/ differently"</p> <p>"Can you think of a different way to deal with your feelings?"</p> <p>"I can help you to think of a different way to cope"</p> <p>"Can you remember feeling this way before and what you did?"</p> <p>"Have you thought about doing this instead?"</p>	<p>"Try and do.....next time you feel like this"</p> <p>"Let's decide what you will do next time you feel like this"</p> <p>"Do you think doing that would be more helpful for you and others?"</p>

**You can't teach children to behave better by making them feel worse. When children feel better, they behave better.**

**-Pam Leo**



**Children could have a mat upon which they can stomp away angry feelings**

## What can I do to help? (continued)

For younger children simpler language will be necessary; a 4-step apology will help them to think about their behaviour, the impact and what they could change.



1. Apology	I am sorry.....
2. Take responsibility	because... that I..... it was wrong because..... (it made you feel bad about yourself, hurt your feelings)
3. How will you fix this	Next time I will.....
4. Ask for forgiveness	Will you forgive me? Do you accept my apology?

### Pause for thought.....



#### When your child melts down: how to keep your cool

*"When my kids are having a meltdown, I find myself just wanting to get as far away as possible and it is really hard to empathise with them"*

However, our children learn how to regulate their emotions and behaviour from watching us regulate *our* emotions and behaviour. So, what can we do to recognise our reaction to their upset and stay calm:

- \* Acknowledge your own feelings.
- \* Remind yourself this is not an emergency and that whatever happens you can deal with it.
- \* Remember expressing feelings is a good thing—once kids feel their emotions, they'll evaporate. Just think of this like the times they need you to take care of their physical needs and try and remain with them.
- \* Take a deep breath and choose love. Sounds corny? But research shows repeating *I choose love* or another mantra works.
- \* Keep it simple. Don't say much. Your calm loving tone is what matters.
- \* Take the pressure off—you don't have to fix your child or the situation, just stay present.
- \* Stop talking as soon as you notice yourself losing your temper. Close your mouth.
- \* Step away from the situation and let it go for a moment.
- \* Remind yourself: You're the grown up and your child is learning from everything you do right now.
- \* Say: I'm working hard to stay calm. I don't want to shout. Let me calm down and we can try that again ok.
- \* Take deep breaths, splash cold water on your face, do what you need to do to calm your body's response. Remind yourself your child is acting like a child because he *is* a child.
- \* Start the interaction again when you feel calm.

TAKE A  
DEEP  
BREATH  
THEN  
CONTINUE



Counting has a calming effect. A bottle full of stars in liquid could offer a helpful calm down activity.

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**Children do well if they can, if they can't we need to figure out why so we can help.**

**-Ross Greene**



Filling balloons with flour and decorating with different emotional expressions can help with naming feelings and releasing stress.



## Further information & resources



[Relaxation activities for children](#)

[Anger links on Mind](#)

[Responding to anger \(parents guide\) on Young Minds](#)

[Parent club Scotland dealing with difficult behaviour](#)

[Relax Kids downloads for anger management](#)

[Living Life to the Full teenage programme](#)

[CAMHS link for Keeping your cool guide & other resources](#)



My Hidden Chimp, workbook for kids by Professor Steve Peters

A Volcano in my Tummy: Helping Children to Handle Anger by Elaine Whitehouse

[1,2,3, Breathe: Are you strong enough to keep your temper? Self-help anger management booklet for those with reading age 12 & up By Dr Chris Williams](#)

The Red Beast Controlling Anger in Children with Asperger's by K.I. Al-ghani

A Monster Handbook of Feelings: A toolkit of exercises and strategies to help children manage BIG feelings by Marneta Viegas— Relax Kids

Calm Parents, Happy Kids by Laura Markham

No-Drama Discipline by Dan Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson



[Flipping my lid – explanation for children](#)

[Dan Siegel longer video explaining his hand model of the brain](#)

[Watch Young Minds responding to anger in children video](#)

**When we exchange angry words for angry words, nasty face for nasty face, slamming door for slamming door, and tear them down with our words because they tore us down with theirs, they will never feel remorse for their own actions. We have hijacked that teachable moment.**

**– Wendy Speake**