



## The Upside of Anger

**Helping children and teenagers experience anger without either of you losing control.**

“Leave me alone! You never listen! You’re so mean!” If you’ve ever been on the receiving end of these statements, you’ll know that dealing with an angry child or teenager is challenging at best. At worst it can lead to explosive arguments and leave us questioning our ability as parents. If you feel uncomfortable with anger, you’re not alone. Most parents find their children’s anger difficult to deal with.

Yet anger is just another emotion. As adults, it tells us when boundaries have been crossed. It is an energy, a fuel and as such we feel it and want to do something with it. Shout, argue, swear, hit something. Others turn their anger inward becoming sullen and withdrawn. Children and teenagers are no different. Moderate to strong feelings of anger and frustration are completely normal in young people, it’s what we teach our children to do with these feelings that matters.

Sydney-based psychotherapist Lisa Chapman, who specialises in mood disorders and family relationships explains: “Anger can be a secondary emotion in many cases. There are often several primary emotions underneath that are driving the anger such as fear, shame and pain.” These primary emotions may also include disappointment, pressure or anxiety. As parents we can help our child uncover these underlying feelings and respond accordingly. Try asking your child, “What else are you feeling besides angry?” Uncovering what is actually beneath the angry reaction will empower you both to respond more calmly. Together you may discover that the strong reaction is reasonable given the primary feeling underneath and the situation creating that underlying emotion.

This process of exploration can also be a useful distraction when tempers are fragile. In her international bestseller ‘The Artist’s Way’, Julia Cameron explains that anger is meant to be listened to and respected. “Its message needs to be translated and acted upon, not acted out, using its energy to move us in a more positive direction.” A powerful message for parents and role models of our future generations.

## **Tips for Managing Your Child's Anger:**

Try to remember that angry kids are hurt or distressed kids. They are not bad and there's nothing wrong with them. They just haven't yet learnt to feel anger without losing touch with wisdom. Acknowledge their feelings by saying something like "I can see you are really angry, what do you need right now?" or "What is your anger trying to tell us?" Be curious rather than defensive. Lower your voice, speak slowly and calmly, creating a contrast. Listen, ask questions and try not to argue back as it will only escalate the situation. Accept that your child has the right to think differently to you.

Allowing an appropriate amount of expression is important too, remembering that anger is an energy so it needs to be moved. Go for a brisk walk together, encourage your child to move, jump or run, have an "angry space" at home where pillows can be thrown or yelled into. For younger kids, an "angry book" or sheets of cardboard with thick textures can be good for expressing anger through drawing or scribble. A punching bag hanging up in a garage is great for older kids. Angry teens may just need to be left alone. Talk about strategies when everyone is calm and agree that it is okay to feel angry and frustrated as long as we find positive ways to deal with it.

As parents, we can teach our children that the world is not fair. People don't always do what we think is right, sometimes we don't get our own way and most importantly, setbacks and disappointments are an inevitable part of life. Just like all emotions, it is normal to experience anger, there are even positives to it, especially if you can help your child harness its energy into a preferred direction.

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