

# Parental Anger

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Parents often ask: "Is it OK to be angry in front of my kids?" "Is it OK to be angry *at* my kids, or does that make me a bad parent?" "What if my partner and I get in a fight when the kids are in the room?" The reality is that anger is a very basic human emotion, and we *all* feel it sometimes. Rather than trying to hold yourself up to an impossible standard of never getting angry, accept that it will happen and make a plan for how you will manage the situation.

If our children see us get angry *and* then calm ourselves down, they learn many things: it's normal to get angry, being angry doesn't make you a bad person, being angry doesn't have to mean losing control, and it is possible to calm yourself down from a big emotional meltdown.

## Plan for Preventing (or Reducing) Meltdowns

- Eat, Sleep, and Be Well: Just as a toddler is more likely to melt down when hungry, tired, or sick, so are we. As much as possible, take care of your body.
- Get support from others. Talking to others (especially other parents) can help!
- Reduce Stress: The more stressed we are, the more likely we'll get upset by little things. Reduce stress through exercise, conscious relaxation, time outdoors, and self-care.
- Figure out your triggers: what situations tend to set off your anger? What can you do to reduce your chance of encountering them or handle the upset as you feel it coming on?
- Look for patterns: If you yell at the kids at the same time every day, make changes in your routine to help things go better. If you battle over the same issue again and again, re-evaluate what limits you want to set and consistent consequences you'll enforce.
- Heal your past: If you have unresolved issues in your emotional / family history, get support with processing them, so you don't take that historical anger out on your kids.
- Acknowledge present stresses: "Mommy is really stressed about work right now. So, she may be acting angry more than usual. But it's not your fault."

## Options for Coping with Anger in the Moment

- Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.
- Concentrate on counting to 10. Don't say/do anything to your child before you reach 10.
- Put your hands in your pockets. This helps you resist the urge to hit or threaten to hit.
- Ask for a break / give yourself a timeout to calm down. Go to another room if possible.
- DON'T: blame, shame, preach, moralize, ridicule, label, criticize the other person.

## Take Time to Process The Situation

- After you calm down – spend some time reflecting on the situation.
  - What about the situation made you angry? What feelings are underneath the anger? Anger is often rooted in fear, sadness / grief, or feeling hurt. So, you may ask yourself: "what am I afraid of?" or "what am I grieving for?"
- Journal. Writing out your thoughts can be a great way to discover what they are!
- Write a letter (but don't send it) to the person who made you angry.
- Find a release. Anger can build up a lot of physical energy that needs a release. Try exercising, punching a pillow, cleaning the house, shredding a piece of paper, cranking up very loud and obnoxious angry music and dancing and yelling along to it.

### What if you're angry at your child?

- Are your expectations appropriate? If you find yourself saying "Kids your age are supposed to do X." or "no matter how hard I try, I can't make my kid..." that shows you have an assumption about what they're developmentally capable of. Check child development resources to make sure you're not holding them to an impossible standard.
- Is this a phase? There are predictable periods in children's lives where they go through lots of developmental changes – "periods of disequilibrium". They tend to be pretty hard to live with at these times. Seek extra support to help you through these rough patches.
- Are they testing you? It's normal for all kids to test their limits. It's how they learn the rules. But it can be infuriating when they do the same thing over and over even when "they know it's wrong". Try not to over-react. Calmly and consistently reinforce limits.
- Do you need a new discipline plan or new parenting skills? Seek out classes or books.
- Is your child just trying to get your attention? How does your child feel right now? Are they angry themselves? Scared? Lonely? Try to empathize with what the need.
- Are you really angry at someone / something else? Then our child may do something minor that makes us explode and take out our anger on them. Try to catch this when it's happening, and if you can't, go back to your child later and apologize to them.

### Fighting with Your Partner

It is definitely unhealthy for kids to be around their parents' fights if the parents are hostile or threatening, insulting each other, dragging up every example of wrong-doing from their whole history, or storming away in anger. This sort of family conflict is associated with guilt and shame, depression, withdrawal, anxiety disorders, aggression and impulse control issues. Sulking, the silent treatment and the cold shoulder are just as hard on kids. They sense the tension and know something is wrong, but don't know what it is, and whether it's their fault.

On the other hand, if parents argue in a healthy way, that can actually benefit the kids. If you're respectful and loving toward each other even in an argument, if you stay focused on the current issue, and if you resolve things before walking away, this can show your kids that people can disagree, and can work out their differences in a constructive manner. They learn that negotiation, compromise, and resolution are possible.

Note: Don't argue about the kids or about parenting issues in front of the kids. It's very important to resolve issues out of their view so you can present a united front to them.

### Resolution

If you fought with your partner in front of your child, be sure to let the child know that you have resolved the argument and that things are OK now between you and your partner.

If you behaved inappropriately, apologize. Say "I was mad, and it's OK to be mad. But, it's not OK to..." (This is also a great message to give your children when they're angry: "Your feelings are always OK. But sometimes the behavior is not, so I need to set limits on that.")

Re-connect. Do something fun or relaxing with your family to heal the stress.

Kids interpret our anger within the whole context of the relationship. If it's a loving, caring, supportive family, with a lot of consistent routines, and reliable commitment to each other's well-being, then an occasional "tantrum" from the parent won't cause the child great distress.

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