



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 4 ANGRY BEHAVIOR**

Dear Parent,

News articles and talk shows today express concern about children who demonstrate hostility, rage, or violence. Some parents and other adults who work in child-oriented professions perceive an increase in the number of children who display anger or exhibit behaviors that indicate reactions to anger, i.e., sulking, temper tantrums, defensiveness, or passive-aggressive attitudes. Disrespectful, argumentative or bullying behavior at school sometimes reflect neglect or abuse experienced at home. Often these behaviors are merely the result of inadequate parenting skills in the area of discipline and emotion. These skills can be acquired through education. This newsletter is intended to provide information that will help parents to understand anger and to eliminate its destructive influence in the lives of their children.

Anger, like all emotions, is neither right nor wrong. How I choose to respond to my emotions is the crucial point! Anger is a strong feeling of displeasure, indignation, or belligerence aroused by a real or supposed wrong. Anger is often the overflow of guilt that comes from failing to practice responsibility and initiative. Like the tip of an iceberg, anger is an expression that follows a build up of unrecognized or unresolved primary feelings like fear, worry, disappointment, or feeling cheated, frustrated, pressured, overwhelmed, mistreated, embarrassed, hurried, etc. Occasional anger can be appropriate and even healthy. Chronic anger, however, creates health and relationship problems. We need to learn when an angry response is suitable. And we need to learn how to handle angry feelings when the expression of anger is inappropriate and destructive. Before an adult can help a child to learn how to be responsive instead of reactive to negative pressure, that adult needs to recognize, name, claim, and tame the forces that erupt into his own anger. Here the aged maxim proves true: "Actions speak louder than words."

We use anger for one of four reasons: (1) to establish control, (2) to win, (3) to get even, or (4) to protect our rights. Independence and personal power are not only desired by all people but are crucial to the development of respectful autonomy. Winning is related to feeling adequate and competent, elements of industry. Retaliation is a defensive response when a person perceives that he is the victim of injustice, disrespect, or misunderstanding; it is the flip side of initiative. And security is the basic need of all people. When a person experiences her security threatened, she will strive to protect her right. These four elements -- security, autonomy, initiative, and industry -- are related

to identity formation and self-esteem, character, and self-discipline. Careful attention to the development of these elements eliminates the kinds of behavior that are rooted in anger.

If a parent displays anger in word or deed, it wounds, intimidates, threatens and overpowers a child. A child will usually fight back, cave in, withdraw fearfully, suppress her feelings, or vent his hurt onto another person or to himself. A pattern of judging, preaching, nagging, condemning, criticizing, or emotional punishment practiced by a parent evokes within a child rebellion, retaliation, passive-aggressive behaviors, resistance, or defensiveness. Chronic anger often signals a parent pattern of physical punishment, i.e., hitting, beating, slapping or kicking, or verbal punishment, i.e., name-calling, sarcasm, and yelling. Children are confused by threatening or abusive language and they fear abandonment by their parent.

Generally children have three reactions to anger: (1) they become inhibited, i.e., they sulk, refuse to talk, give hateful looks to their parent; (2) they act impulsively, i.e., temper tantrums, swearing, running out of the room/house; or (3) they respond with control, i.e., they respectfully express their need or position. Some children suppress their anger. They push it deep within and do not acknowledge it or act on it in any way. That is damaging to them psychologically and physically. Often suppressed or repressed anger appears in the form of headaches, asthma attacks, itching, and insomnia. Frustration about repeated experiences of powerlessness is particularly harmful to children. Anger gets displaced when children feel injustice and have no legitimate way of dealing with it. That means that they act out their anger at some one else or do harm to

themselves. Some children will explode at school or on the playground; others have poor performance results,

and some will demonstrate an attitude of floating hostility.

How can a parent eliminate the roots of anger or give a child the skills to cope with and redirect stresses that evoke angry behavior? Primarily parents can be intentional about practicing patience, self-control, respect, restitution, asking forgiveness and offering forgiveness. Parents can seek the grace of God to make a conscious choice to put on the mind of Christ. It is the key to satisfied relational living. Secondly, parents can teach through word and example the conflict resolution skills that are so crucial to living in relationship. Be pro-active. Make the following actions characteristic of your interaction style.

#### 1. Cool Off

Model cooling off techniques, i.e., time out, deep breathing, visualizing a pre-determined peace filled image, counting to ten, relaxing your body

#### 2. Think

- Think before you speak.
- Separate the person from the behavior. The person is good; the behavior is hurtful.

#### 3. Listen

- Avoid interrupting your child when he is speaking.
- Ask clarifying questions that show you are listening without a preconceived opinion or judgment.
- Let your body language demonstrate that you are attentive and open to receive what your child has to say.

#### 4. Speak

- Use "I statements"; not negative comments. For example, "I feel ignored when you do not include me in the conversation" rather than "You are rude."

- Speak respectfully. No name-calling or labeling. Remember that "hearts have been broken by harsh words spoken that sorrow can never set right." (author unknown)
- Say what it is you think you have heard.

#### 5. Problem Solve

- Name the problem. Be specific, i.e., "It is distracting when the radio and TV are playing at the same time."
- Together think of solutions for the situation.
- Consider the consequences of each idea and answer "What is the most helpful or least harmful choice?"
- Mentally test the decision before acting on it.

#### 6. Pray

Speak with ease statements like, "I need to pray about this before I can respond" or "Give your mother and I a few days to pray about it. We'll give you an answer on Thursday."

Finally, parents may benefit from the advice of other parents and psychologists who engage successfully in the soul formation of children. May the suggestions that follow affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine ways that you can nurture peace within your child.

- **CALM BUT FIRM:** Respond to angry outbursts with tolerance. Focus the child's attention to a positive activity instead of scolding. Calmness will diffuse the child's anger and her tendency to use anger for attention in the future.
- **AVOID NEGATIVISM:** When you anticipate a negative response, make a statement instead of asking a question, i.e., "It is time to go to bed" instead of "Do you want to go to bed?"
- **FOSTER AUTONOMY:** Involve your child in developing the solution to a problem by recognizing alternatives and consequences.
- **ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE:** Try to talk with your child about why she is angry. Honor and validate her feelings. Tell her that it is "okay" to be angry but also necessary to work through the anger. Help her to see that acting angry does not solve her problem. Engage her in naming alternative behaviors for "the next time".
- **OFFER APOLOGY:** If your child hurts anyone because of his anger, make him apologize. If he has broken

something, make him responsible for repair or restitution.

- **WHEN THE WELL RUNS DRY:** Sometimes a child's irritability can be turned around by eating a nourishing snack, getting exercise, taking a nap, having a shower or bath. Often irritability is related to tiredness or over-stimulation.
- **THREE T's:** There are three things to remember when you are angry with a person or a situation: (1) Take a deep breath; (2) Take a step back; and (3) Try again.
- **ASSERTIVE EXPRESSION:** Use I-messages instead of judgments, like "You are a . . .", "You never . . .", "You always . . ." An I-message has three elements: behavior, feeling, and consequence.
  - (1) When ... (state the behavior),
  - (2) I feel ... (state the feeling),
  - (3) because ... (state the consequence).

Example: When dirty dishes are left on the table I feel taken for granted because I am left to clean up the mess that others make.

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of **IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers**, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation. Reach her at [DrPatMcCormack@aol.com](mailto:DrPatMcCormack@aol.com).

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