

Understanding Anger in Children and Adolescents

Anger is an emotion that often comes with a negative connotation. However, anger, like any other feeling, is a normal emotion that everyone feels from time to time. Anger can result from deeper feelings of hurt, fear, frustration, rejection or pain, making it challenging to understand. Anger itself is not unhealthy, it is how we channel and process the anger that can become problematic. Knowing the difference between healthy bouts of anger and anger that might be a sign of a more serious emotional disturbance can help caregivers and educators more appropriately intervene and offer support.



It should be noted that it is not uncommon during early childhood for kids to have outbursts or angry tantrums. As children enter into school, they begin to gain more control over their impulses and start to develop social emotional skills like self-regulation. As children's brains continue to develop, they gain the ability to manage their anger constructively, if they live in an environment where anger is handled in a healthy way. Problems with peers, family or at school may become apparent for children who continue to struggle with anger and aggression as they grow in development. A number of factors can contribute to a child or adolescent's individual struggles with anger including:

- Genetics and other biological factors
- Behavioral health conditions such as ADHD, autism, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety and Depression
- Environment including the role of trauma, family dysfunction and certain parenting styles

According to Yale Medicine Child Study Center, anger issues are one of the most common reasons children get referred for behavioral health treatment. When anger begins to interfere with a child or adolescent's daily life, professional guidance can be helpful to help get to the root of the anger. Some signs of concern can include:

- Being unable to control aggressive impulses and hitting people (other than siblings), past the age of 6
- Frequent explosive outbursts
- Constantly oppositional
- Unable to acknowledge his/her role in creating the situation (feeling victimized or picked on)
- Frequently losing friends or is often caught up in interpersonal conflict
- Appears preoccupied with revenge
- Threatens to hurt his or herself physically (or actually does so)
- Damages property regularly
- Repeatedly expresses hatred towards self or someone else
- Hurts smaller children or animals

Due to the many possible causes for anger, emotional outbursts and aggression, an accurate diagnosis is key in getting a child help. A family physician or trained mental health professional can help guide families towards appropriate interventions and supports.

Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping to teach and guide youth towards healthy anger management. Some helpful strategies and tips include:

- Start with yourself- model self-regulation and conflict resolution skills
- Remember that all feelings are allowed- listen and acknowledge feelings of anger. Remember that acknowledging feelings doesn't mean you have to share the same perspective.
- Help your child to recognize warning signs and triggers
- Engage in practices and routines to help your child work through daily emotions- encourage talk about negative feelings or conflicts
- Offer guidance to build on problem-solving skills
- Have rules, rewards and consequences
- Teach the STOP approach:
 - Slow down and take a breath
 - Think about what you want to do or say
 - Review your options
 - Proceed to action

References: American Psychological Association; Yale Medicine; <https://psychologytoday>; The Child Mind Institute; National Association of School Psychologist