

6 Ways to Help Your Child Manage Their Anger

I remember it like it was yesterday: I'm standing and watching helplessly as my usually cute 4-year-old screams and kicks on the living room floor because we're not going to the playground. She's clenching her fists and gritting her teeth so hard that her jaw is shaking. Sound familiar?

These dramatic and sometimes terrifying displays of anger in young children often come from a lack of language, explains Meri Wallace, LCSW, parenting expert, child and family therapist, and author of *Birth Order Blues*. In other words, toddlers and preschoolers can't tell you what's wrong or what they need. "Instead, they express these feelings and needs in a physical way," says Wallace. "They will cry and scream, thrash around, or kick their feet."

Young children also lack impulse control, so when frustrated or angry, it becomes an almost instant stimulus-response reaction. Since they can't effectively communicate their want, needs, or feelings, they may lash out with aggressive behaviour like hitting or biting.

"Toddlers see their wishes and desires as urgent," Wallace continues. A tantrum is a child's form of protest about having their desires thwarted and feeling certain powerlessness.

While watching your toddler convulse in anguish over a missed playground visit may feel anything but normal, anger is a perfectly natural emotion. Not only that but as with all emotions, it follows children through all the stages of development into adulthood.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some parents saw more flashes of anger due to kids feeling cooped up. But, as Wallace says, it's important to remember that parents would face developmental issues of physical expression of anger anyway. So, no matter why it occurs, it's your job to teach children the best ways to handle it.

Read on for some tips on how to handle an angry, aggressive child and help your little person manage their emotions.

Accept Your Child's Anger

When your child has an angry outburst, acknowledge it. Say something like, "I can see you're angry." If you know why they are mad, you can add the reason: "I can see you're angry because you love swinging on the swing, and we have to leave the park."

Next, accept their anger. Tell your child, "It's OK to be angry." You want your child to feel that both they and their emotions are OK. You don't want them to think they must hide their feelings.

Researchers say validation is essential because it helps reduce the emotional intensity, allowing for emotional regulation. On the flip side, invalidation communicates that someone's feelings or description of their experience is "wrong." This tends to escalate the emotions.

Encourage Them To Use Words

Children do not naturally know what words to use, explains Wallace. So you have to teach them this social skill. For example, you can tell your child: "When you feel angry, you need to use words," or "I want to hear what's upsetting you. If you use words, I'll understand better and can help."

If they can't figure out how to explain their anger, you might help them with a script: "When you're angry, say, 'I'm angry,' and I will help you." Over time, children internalize your voice and your rules.

By age 5, children develop their superego, the moral or "conscience" aspect of personality. This Freudian concept suggests that the superego reflects the values of parents and other authority figures. This can act as an internal stop sign and help them control aggressive impulses.

Find a Positive Solution

For generations, tantrums were viewed as manipulation attempts. Experts used to advise parents to handle an angry, aggressive child by letting them "cry it out" or risk spoiling them. That's no longer the case. Instead, paediatricians advise handling them calmly and directly with different tactics to help de-escalate the situation.

Though parents can indeed fall into a negative pattern of gratifying a child's every wish to avoid a meltdown, letting children cry it out doesn't teach them a more positive way to handle themselves. In fact, children need help moving out of their anger, and guiding them through it is better than letting them sink into it.

Some ways to help them through a tantrum include:

- **Finding a solution:** "It's hard to share your favourite stuffie. Let's put it away while your friend is here to play and we can take it back out later."
- **Using distractions or redirection:** "I know you're upset that it's raining and we can't go to the park. Why don't we go play in the tent in the living room?"

- **Offering an alternative or compromise:** "We can't have ice cream before dinner, but we can have apple slices."

These strategies help move your child away from the frustration and toward something that excites them.

Slow Down

Stop a tantrum before it starts by not immediately saying "no" when a child requests something. Instead, pause and say aloud, "Let's see. You want that new toy. Let's talk about that." Taking a beat allows you to think about the request and how to positively deny it, if necessary, or divert your child's attention.

Slowing down and discussing it also lets your child understand the reason for a refusal and accept it more agreeably. You want to give your child the feeling that you hear them, care about their desires, and let them know they can trust you to help them through life's disappointments.

Sometimes, a change of location can also stop a tantrum in its tracks or break through an impasse. For example, you can say, "Let's go to see that doggy you like at the pet store," or "Let's go to the pharmacy and get the hair clips you need. We'll keep talking on the way."

Find a Quiet Space

If you're in public, try to move away from the audience. Focus on your child and yourself, not other people's judgment.

This focus shift relieves any pressure you might feel from onlookers and allows you to relate to your child privately. The less noise and fuss there is, the easier it will be for you to help your child find calm. Take their hand and say, "Come sit on my lap, and we'll talk this over."

Set a Firm Limit

While you want to convey that it is OK if your child feels angry, you need to make clear that the aggressive behaviour is not. For example, if your child hits their sibling, you can say, "It's OK to be angry. Your anger is OK. But, you cannot hit." Then add, "We don't hit or kick anyone."

Next, direct them toward a positive way to react to the situation. Explain your limit: "Hitting hurts. We don't hurt anyone." Children are more likely to cooperate if the reason is plausible.