

The Parent's Corner

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WHY IS MY CHILD SO ANGRY?

February 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

Explosive, impulsive bursts of anger are one of the most common reasons for counseling referrals made by parents or teachers. Anger can range from a negative tone of voice to full-blown destruction of a classroom or home and often leaves adults feeling helpless and frustrated. Below are some tips to navigating your child's anger and supporting them at school and home:

1. **Remember that anger is often a secondary emotion.** One of the reasons therapy is so beneficial to angry kids and teens is its ability to unpack the feelings that sit beneath anger. Take, for example, a student who purposefully seems to pick fights in class every time his teacher begins a math lesson. Unpacking his hidden feelings may show he struggles with math and, in order not to feel inferior or embarrassed, he manipulates the situation so he will inevitably be removed from class and not have to face what feels like a strong emotional challenge for him. We see this often with "mean girl" behavior as well -- a new girl joins a friend group and an original member of the group retaliates by trying to turn the others against her, out of fear of rejection and losing her friends to this potential new threat. The Anger Iceberg picture on the right shows a visual of the anger that others see, versus the hidden underlying feelings below the surface.

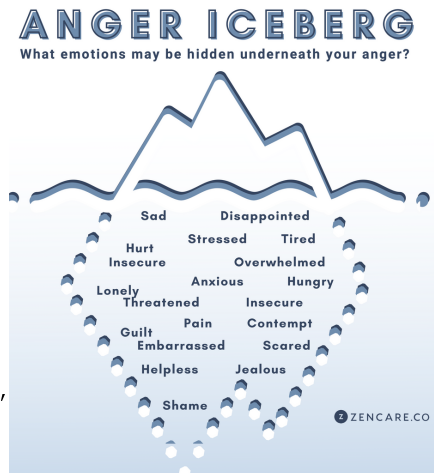
2. **Assess any underlying diagnoses.** As touched on above with the math lesson example, it is important for parents to evaluate any underlying issues that may be causing anger episodes. A therapist or organization who does evaluations can help determine if your child's anger may be due to anxiety, a learning disability, ADHD, Autism, or another related mental-health concern. Addressing these concerns may be vital to your child's ability to utilize anger-management skills.

3. **Avoid power struggles and model appropriate skills.** It seems self-explanatory that if your child sees you being quick to anger and lashing out, they will likely adapt these behaviors when they are angry as well. However, managing a child who has explosive anger episodes can be extremely frustrating, exhausting and, at times, even scary. It is normal to find yourself wanting to engage in a power struggle and remind your child you are in charge. However, it is best to avoid power struggles with your child when possible. It tends to only exacerbate anger episodes and fuel the adrenaline your child is already experiencing.

4. **Learn their triggers.** What is it that seems to set your child off? Being told to get off the video game? Homework? A sibling changing the channel they are watching? Learning your child's anger triggers will help you put strategies in place to slow the situation before it escalates into full meltdown-mode. Giving gentle warnings before their time is up on the game, taking "brain breaks" during homework time to get up and stretch, or setting a TV schedule for siblings could make the difference between a peaceful environment and a volatile one.

5. **Ask your child what helps and what makes things worse.** If your child is someone who needs personal space when they are angry, approaching them right away will further frustrate them. On the flip side of this, if your child is someone who benefits from talking through things then leaving them alone to manage feelings on their own may also be unhelpful. This is why it is important to talk with your child about what helps them calm down and what makes them more angry.

6. **Praise positive behavior.** Positive reinforcement is SO important when you have a child who is frequently angry. Often these children feel that they are in trouble so often that they are looked at in a negative light and nothing they do will change the fact that they are a "bad" kid. Praise your child when they are able to finally calm themselves down or when you catch them doing something positive. Children will continue behavior that ends in a positive payout for them.



As always, your School Partnership Program (SPP) Therapist is in your corner if you need extra support!