



Handling Your Child's Intense Anger

By Judy Arnall

Twelve-year-old Jared didn't like his Mom's answer to his request for a sleepover that night. She was tired and didn't feel up to monitoring a wakeover – really, do they ever sleep? Jared thought that his Mom was being unreasonable. When his Mom maintained her “No” after several pleas, Jared couldn't contain his anger at her. He kicked the garbage can, and spilled the contents all over the kitchen, pushed his little brother's backpack out of the way of his coat (knocking papers out of the backpack) and grabbed his coat and slithered into his shoes while walking out the door and slamming it. He walked three blocks to the store to get a slushie and get a grip.

Meanwhile, Mom was also angry. Shouldn't kids accept parental authority without getting angry all the time? As a fervent advocate of parenting completely without punishment, this is a common question I

get from parents in my classes. How do parents handle the above scenario without punishing, escalating the child's anger or their own? The first thing to keep in mind is that children have the right to feel angry. It's part of the palette of many human emotions. Everyone feels angry during various moments, and it's a normal, useful emotion. Anger is a part of our biological make-up, as much as our feet, chins and elbows. We must accept that our children are not going to like us, our opinions or our actions, from time to time and that is perfectly okay. Second, we must teach our children not to limit their anger and feelings, but only how to limit the expression of them. Jared feeling very angry is okay. Kicking the garbage can, shoving the backpack and slamming the door is not okay. Grabbing his coat and going for the walk is great. Swearing and grumbling is not.

Third, as parents in the line of fire, we often feel angry when our children are feeling angry at us. That's okay too. We are allowed to feel angry. However, we often get carried away and meet expressions of anger with expressions of our own anger: when we get yelled at, swore at, hit, or otherwise abused, we threaten ultimatums, we issue consequences, we spank, we yell, we force our children into their time-out. We react. None of that is helpful. The problem is that it's punitive and it serves to escalate everyone's anger. It also damages our valuable parent-child bond. We can feel angry, but the best way to deal with our anger is to take a parent time-out. Being sworn at and hit as parents is not right and definitely needs to be addressed, but timing and manner of handling it is everything.

How do you handle anger from your child that builds your bond?

1. Stay calm. Deal with your own rising anger by taking a time-out physically, emotionally or cognitively. For your own self-preservation, get away from the other person's tirade. Go watch a video in another room. Pretend to read a book. Put on the ipod earbuds. Removing yourself from the scene defuses the situation. Ignore it if things are being broken by your school-aged child or teen. Now is not the time to deal with it.

2. For young children, try to distract them with a movie, or new activity. They often need help calming down and isolation time-outs escalate their anger and often erupt into power struggles. Do not ever force their time-out. Offer to sit with them someplace more calming. Take them out of the vortex of anger by carrying them to a calm, quiet, “no occupants” space. Speak calm words or hum. Rock them in your lap to get them calm. Breathe with them. If they are trying to throw or break something, you are bigger than they are and can move them to a safer place. Just stay calm and wait until they get calm.
3. Make a mental note next time to pack away anything valuable to you until your child expresses their anger more non-destructively.
4. Don’t clean or fix anything in the heat of the moment. Jared’s Mom left the garbage mess and her other son’s backpack mess for Jared to face when he returned from the store in a calmer mood. As scary as it is for parents to witness the angry rampage and mess that children can make, it’s important to show them that you are calm (even if you aren’t on the inside!), you are the adult in control and the mess they are making is not bothering you. The more they see that breaking things has an affect on you, the more they will do it to punish you when they are angry.
5. When everyone is calm, invite a talk. Express your concerns and listen without judgment to their point of view. Problem-solve win-win solutions. Also problem-solve non-destructive ways to handle their anger for the next time. See the article titled “Calm Down Tools: 70 ways to calm down in the heat of anger” at www.professionalparenting.ca/articles.html under the section of Parenthood In General
6. Contract with them for a time that the result of their anger episode will be cleaned up, fixed or restored to the satisfaction of all whom it affects. Ensure that the school-aged and teenaged child does the work. Do not do this yourself! For younger children, like preschoolers and toddlers, you will have to help them. Do not do this step in the heat of the moment. It will escalate the power struggle.

7. Hug. Show your child that you love her and all her emotions unconditionally!
8. Model healthy ways to express anger yourself. Examine closely if you hurt others or things in the middle of expressing your anger.

Realize that learning to handle anger is a childhood process and even many adults struggle with it. Talk to other parents and you will see that they have problems containing their anger in parenting. Young children hit, bite, push and throw things until they get more verbal. School-aged children sometimes hit but more often throw things, slam doors, swear and talkback. Teens swear, break, throw and slam and yell. Adults hopefully use their I-Statements and their time-outs! Children have 18 years to practice and perfect it to a functional adult level.

Also recognize that the less you punish your child, the stronger your bond becomes and they are more apt to do step #6 willingly to please you. Instead of punishing, problem-solve and listen as you do in all your other respectful relationships. Children, like adults, feel less angry when they have more input into decisions and situations that affect them.

Above all, embrace anger. It's a gift.

Judy Arnall is a professional speaker, instructor of Parent Effectiveness Training at the University of Calgary; Continuing Education, and offers over 50 parenting topics for organization presentations and Lunch 'N' Learns. Visit her website for more information www.professionalparenting.ca

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