



# Anger



## What causes anger?

Everyone experiences anger. It is a normal reaction to frustration, stress or disappointment. It can occur in children as young as three or four months old. Anger can be quite noticeable in toddlers who often express it through tantrums and other aggressive actions. However, as they grow and develop, most children learn how to deal with some of the frustrations of everyday life. They also learn how to express their anger in acceptable ways. Some anger can be helpful. For example, when expressed effectively, anger can help tell someone else, "Stop. I don't like that." Anger can also motivate us to overcome problems and achieve goals. Whether children's anger is positive or negative depends on how effectively it is managed and whether it can be directed towards positive goals.

When children lack skills for managing anger it can lead to aggressive behaviour. Usually, it is the aggressive action that follows anger that most concerns parents, carers and school staff. Learning to manage anger involves developing social and emotional skills for calming down and having ways to express angry feelings assertively. This means learning to use words rather than aggressive actions to communicate feelings. Parents, carers and school staff have an important role in helping children learn to manage anger effectively.

## Differences in children's use of anger

Before they start school, most young children have learned that getting aggressive when angry is not considered appropriate behaviour. They may have also learned some strategies for managing anger, for example, counting to 10, explaining what they are annoyed about, or asking an adult for help to resolve a problem. These are positive coping strategies that help children manage their angry feelings and build skills for effective relationships.

Some children try to manage angry feelings by avoiding the situation or person that has led them to be angry. Children who use this kind of strategy very often do not build effective skills for relating to others, which can cause them problems in later years. Some other children seem to have few strategies for managing anger and so may continue to act aggressively and impulsively. Children with anger problems are often rejected by other children because of their difficult behaviour. Feeling rejected, they may think others are being mean to them and become angrier. This may start a pattern of thinking that leads them to respond with aggressive behaviour even where no intention to hurt is present. For example, they may get angry when somebody bumps into them and react aggressively without stopping to think that it may have been an accident.

The different ways that children manage anger are influenced by a combination of personal characteristics, how much stress the child and family are under and opportunities available at home and school for learning how to cope with feelings. From early childhood, some children seem to react more to frustration and take longer to return to a calm state. These children may need extra assistance to learn skills for controlling anger. Some children don't learn how to manage anger because being angry is not okay in their families. They don't get the chance to practise positive ways of managing anger or telling others when they are angry. Children can also learn aggression through the examples of others. When the adults responsible for children's care get angry quickly and often, or when they use reactive, harsh and inconsistent discipline, children are more likely to behave aggressively themselves. Research indicates that physical aggression in children is most common at the age of two. As skills for language and thinking develop, aggressive behaviour is reduced. However, for some primary school children aggression remains at a high level. These children may benefit from professional help to learn to control aggression and stop behaviour problems becoming worse.

Babies, toddlers and pre-school children frequently experience ups and downs when they are trying to **keep a balance with their feelings and behaviours**. Helping them to find ways to balance these feelings is called **self-regulation**.

Primary school children are generally more aware of their feelings and may be able to consciously identify **the experience of anger** and manage angry feelings. Through positive parenting, children can be **helped to cool down and stay calm**.

**See also:**

**Anger: Suggestions for families**

**Anger: Further resources**