

# KIDS' DOC

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## Anger management in children



by W. Benton Gibbard, M.C.S., M.D.

### What is anger?

Anger is a powerful and key emotion. Every day children see anger on television and in video games, they may read about it, or feel it. Getting angry is a normal part of life, regardless of age. Because anger is a common and unavoidable part of childhood, it is important for children to have tools for managing their anger.

Anger is usually a signal that something is wrong. It may mean we are hurt, our rights are violated, or our needs or wants are not being met. Feelings of anger may stem from external events (things that happen to us), or internal thoughts (what we think). These feelings can vary in strength from mild anger to fury and

rage. There is nothing wrong with feeling angry. It is a concern only when people are not able to properly express or deal with their feelings of anger. Poor

copied skills may lead to hurtful conduct, such as vandalism, fighting, and self-harming actions. Persistent feelings of anger can also lead to hostility, hatred, and patterns of aggressive behaviour.

Little is known about how often feelings of anger may affect children's health. There is proof that angry teens are at increased risk for certain harmful health outcomes, such as raised blood pressure, coronary heart disease, and drug abuse. In adults, there is a connection between anger and both high blood pressure and heart disease. Anger is considered to be a harmful component of the "Type A" personality pattern, which can lead to coronary heart disease.



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## Anger in pre-school and school age children

The ability to feel and express anger is linked to the overall process of child development. As children advance in their understanding of the world around them, their understanding and expression of anger also changes. For example, anger appears in early infancy, but the number of things that might make an infant angry are limited. As children develop, the number of situations that make them angry increases because they understand more, and they have been in more situations that might make them angry.



Family interactions with children impact their emotional growth and how they feel and express anger. Children learn how to deal with their feelings of anger by imitating the behaviour of their parents. It is not enough to tell children what to do, or how to handle anger. Rather, they must see effective ways of dealing with anger in their day-to-day observations of others. Children learn by watching what adults do, not by listening to what is said! In addition, if children often experience anger within their families, they will be more likely to develop patterns of thinking and acting in angry ways in the future.

## Anger in teens

Teens face many important developmental challenges, including gaining independence from their parents, adjusting to their changing bodies, developing deeper peer relationships, forming a social and sexual identity, and planning for a career. This can be a difficult time for teens and their parents. The teen years often provoke anger. Teens may express anger through sarcasm, the use of profanity (course language), fighting against rules, arguing, mood swings, depression, changes in sleep patterns, or social withdrawal.

Teens often say that trying to get along with others, especially their brothers and sisters, often cause them to be angry. Teens also report that it is easiest to express their angry feelings to their mothers, brothers and sisters, or friends. Problems with anger management in teens are also strongly associated with past exposure to violence - either at home, or in other situations where they have felt threatened.

## Do girls and boys express anger differently?

Society seems to have different standards about how children express anger, depending on whether they are boys or girls. There does seem to be gender differences, but research in this area is conflicting. In the past, anger was viewed as more appropriate for boys than girls. It was felt that as girls grew-up, they learned to hold in and hide their negative feelings. Likewise, parents were found to be more accepting of anger in boys than in girls. Recent studies show that girls may experience anger more frequently than boys. This finding may show girls have a greater awareness of their emotions and/or are more verbally expressive about their emotions than boys, or that girls may face more situations that cause anger than boys. Boys, on the other hand, are found to show more angry outbursts than girls; often acting out

their anger in harmful ways, such as throwing and breaking things. This is because expressing anger in harmful ways is seen as more socially acceptable for boys than girls. However, there is good evidence these gender-based roles are weakening, allowing girls to express feelings of anger.

## How can you help your child manage anger?



- Be a good role model in how you deal with your own feelings of anger. Be honest and open about your feelings.
- Stay calm when dealing with your child's anger, and do not take his/her anger personally. The angrier you become, the more you will add to your child's anger. If you feel yourself becoming too angry, take a break.
- Treat your children with respect. Encourage them to talk to you, and to express their feelings openly. Discuss your child's behaviour in private, and not in front of others.
- If possible, head off an angry outburst before it becomes too strong. Try to distract your child, remove him/her from the situation,

or encourage him/her to have a time-out. Learn the signs that s/he is getting angry. Does his/her face become flushed, or does the volume of his/her voice change?

- Encourage the use of “time-out” as a way for your child to take control over his/her anger. A time-out will give him/her time to realise why s/he is angry, and to plan ways to deal with his/her anger when s/he has a chance to cool down.
- Help your child recognise when s/he is getting angry, and encourage him/her to remove him/herself from the situation before s/he does or says something regrettable.
- Change your child’s environment to prevent experiences or situations of stress, anger or frustration.
- Limit your child’s access to movies or video games that contain violence or inappropriate anger.
- Do not give in to your child when s/he is having a tantrum, as this will only teach him/her that by acting in this way, s/he can get what s/he wants.
- When your child is angry, do not lecture or tell him/her at that moment how s/he could have handled the situation differently.
- Re-examine the situation when your child has cooled down, and at that point discuss with him/her possible alternative solutions to the problem.
- Provide your child with ways to blow-off steam when s/he is angry. Make sure the tools are safe and suited to his/her age level. Examples might be: (1) encouraging him/her to ride a bike; (2) listen to music; (3) write a letter to the person s/he is mad at; and, (4) draw a picture about the situation that made him/her angry.
- Teach your child problem-solving strategies. What is my problem? What are my choices? Pick one? Did it work?
- If you know your child or teen will be facing a situation that triggers feelings of anger, role play ways s/he can handle the situation, such as counting



to ten, or learning to state his/her feelings in a non-threatening manner.

- Teens may benefit from peer-group discussions, where they can learn from the experiences of others about how to effectively express or control anger.

## Learn to understand anger

Children, like adults, cannot avoid getting angry. Anger can be a normal and healthy emotion when it is not drawn out, or acted out in a way that is harmful to others. To deny feelings of anger, or to not allow you to express it, can also be harmful to yourself or others. Learning what our angry feelings are telling us about ourselves - whether we are being hurt, violated, or ignored - is an important part of growing-up. Just as important as listening to what our anger is telling us, is learning proper ways to express our anger, so that the wrong that made us angry is corrected.

Learning to manage our angry feelings in ways that are healthy and respectful of others, is an important skill that needs to be learned during childhood and teenage years. Unfortunately,

children often learn these strategies from poor role models such as television, peers, or other adults with poor anger management skills. All of us can benefit from learning and practising positive, socially acceptable ways of dealing with anger. Learning how to settle, without ignoring, our anger will prevent turning anger into unhealthy patterns of hostility and violence. If anger is a problem that is becoming too overwhelming for you to deal with, it may be important to contact someone who can help you. Good people to talk to include a teacher or guidance counsellor, a psychologist, family physician or pediatrician. 🍎

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# Cold weather safety

by KIDSAFE Connection



Winter provides many fun outdoor activities for kids, including skating, sledding, skiing and snowboarding. Children spend time outdoors traveling to school, during school recess breaks, while walking or waiting for their ride home, and while playing. These activities do not stop when cold weather arrives.

When children are outside, they don't often realize how cold they are getting. Instead of going indoors to warm up, they stay outside to continue playing. Each winter, many Albertans are treated for frostbite and hypothermia. Frostbite occurs when an area of skin, usually fingers, toes, ears, cheeks, nose or chin, feels slightly painful, then turns white. Shivering and loss of coordination are signs of hypothermia. Hypothermia occurs when the body loses heat and is

not able to maintain normal body temperature.

## Tips to prevent frostbite and hypothermia:

### PARENTS - preparing children for cold weather

- Check weather forecasts to plan for clothing needs throughout the day.
- Choose play areas with warm shelters.
- Teach children the signs of frostbite and hypothermia and the importance of dressing warmly.
- Remember that the WINDCHILL FACTOR — *wind plus freezing temperatures* — means it may be a lot colder than what the thermometer shows. Skin freezes more quickly when the windchill factor is high.

### KIDS - wear the gear

- Dress in layers of clothing. If you get too warm, you can take off one layer at a time.
- Wear a hat. Most of our body heat is lost through our heads.
- To prevent frostbite, keep ears covered, wear mittens instead of gloves, and wear warm, waterproof boots.

## Other winter safety tips for parents and kids

- To prevent clothing-related strangulation, wear neck warmers instead of scarves and remove drawstrings from clothing.
- Keep sidewalks clear of snow and ice.
- Vehicles take longer to stop on snow and ice. Before crossing the road, be sure all vehicles have come to a complete stop.
- Stay away from snowplows and snow blowers.
- Ensure children never put their tongues on cold metal.
- Snow forts can be fun, but building tunnels can be dangerous. Tunnels may collapse and suffocate a child.
- Young children should be well supervised when they play outside. 🍎

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- in whole, or in part, in Calgary's Child Magazine (published six times a year).
- at <http://www.crha-health.ab.ca/clin/child/paed/parents.htm> (some issues)
- on the ACHF website at <http://www.childrenshospital.ab.ca>

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