



Kris' Corner:

A Series of Articles by Parenting Expert

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HOW DO I DEAL WITH MY CHILD'S ANGER?"

HELPING TO PRESERVE OUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM WITH A SIMPLE TOOL: THE ANGER KIT

In my last article "Avoiding the Tornado", I talked about the need for us, as caregivers, to calm ourselves down before trying to deal with our child's difficult behavior. This can set the stage for productive and creative problem-solving. However, there is one step before that can happen. We need to help our child calm down. This article will describe one of several different tools you can use to help your child regain control of their body, their feelings and their behavior.

There are many ways to process the feelings that come with frustration and anger. The more we can help our children realize this, the more they can learn to cope with difficult situations. Let's face it, growing up, in large part, is about learning how to cope with the tough stuff that life throws at us. So let's begin helping our child learn those skills, as early as possible. This can be very empowering for your child. Instead of your child getting angry, acting out and getting punished for terrible behavior, he/she can begin to understand their upset feelings and use their tools to help themselves feel better and then we can partner with them to try to address the problem.

ANGER AND THE BRAIN; the Amygdala vs. the Hippocampus

We all know that anger can be very problematic. When people are angry they are "not in their *right* mind". They are in a part of the brain called the Amygdala. It's the "*fight or flight*" part of the brain. We cannot be reasonable, logical and rational when we are in the Amygdala. In order to engage the part of the brain that can be reasonable, logical and rational, the Hippocampus, we need to calm the Amygdala down. Then, the Hippocampus can kick in and help us make sense of the situation. But nothing rational can take place until the child's mind/body system is calm. You will not be able to reason or discuss the problem with the child until they are not in that "*fight or flight*" state. Using physical outlets to "let out the bad feelings" in the body will help the brain to come back into balance and set the stage for discussing the problem and learning about our behavior.

DISCUSSING ANGER

It's very important to acknowledge anger as a legitimate feeling. Just having a whole kit dedicated to anger sends an important message to your child; *Anger is normal and there are ways to deal with it, constructively, without hurting anyone.*

The way you introduce the Anger Kit is important. You need to have a conversation about anger when the child is calm and able to engage. Normalizing anger is very important. Children often feel that being angry makes them "Bad". Anger needs to be addressed as an important feeling that often happens when things feel unfair; when a friend decides to play with someone else on the playground, or the teacher yells at us when it was the person behind us making the noise, or when we really want to eat that candy bar right before dinner. Your child can tell you what makes them angry at times.

Then share with your child that you get angry also and talk about the things you do to calm yourself down when you feel that way. Maybe you call a friend to talk, or maybe you go out for a walk outside, or maybe you fix yourself a cup of tea and write about it. And also acknowledge that sometimes your anger can get out of control and you do things that you're sorry for later. It happens to all of us.

THE ANGER KIT

You can use a lunch box or some other container to hold the different components of the kit. Through your discussion you may come up with ways to tailor the kit to your child's preferences, but for now, here are some suggestions:

- * Play Doh (to pound your anger out)
- * Bubbles (to blow your anger out)
- * Crayons and paper (to draw an angry picture, maybe rip up afterwards)
- * A couple of balloons (blow anger into and pop or let go)
- * A sponge (fill with water and squeeze your anger out)
- * A small hourglass timer (punch pillow till it runs out)
- * A stress ball (to squeeze anger out)
- * A Fidget Spinner (to spin your anger out)

USING THE ANGER KIT

You need to explain that the Anger Kit is not just to play with whenever they want to....that it's to be saved for those times that are really hard and frustrating. See if they can think of a good place to keep it, maybe the top of the refrigerator?

The trick with the Anger Kit is not to wait too long before you take it out. When you first hear your child's voice whining at that pitch that just drives you crazy, stop what you're doing, get down at their level and say, "It sounds like nothing's going right for you right now, would you like to get your Anger Kit out and let those feelings out of your body? Then we can try to help you fix the problem." If you wait until your child is in a rage, they may just grab the kit and throw it up against the wall, while telling you it doesn't work and it's stupid. They're right, it doesn't work at that point.

After the child punches, blows, squeezes etc..... you can ask them if they feel better and if they want to talk about the problem. The most important message through all this effort is that they are not "BAD" for being angry.

Final Thoughts

The most important message through all this effort is that children are not "bad" for feeling angry. When we simply punish the negative behavior that accompanies frustration and powerlessness, children experience feelings of failure, rejection and plummeting self-esteem. We are also missing a teaching opportunity.

Instead, let's help our children to mature and to develop appropriate coping skills to handle frustration and anger. Let's give them the confidence they will need to feel strong in the world, and to make the best decisions. They need our help, patience and love to rise above the struggle and come out on the other side with intact self-esteem and the knowledge that we will be there for them the whole way. It takes more time and effort, but the investment is worth it. Good Luck!

Kris Imbrie began the first 15 years of her career as an Elementary School Teacher, then crossed over into the field of social work as the Child Advocate at a battered woman's shelter for 10 years. She has written two violence prevention curriculums which received state awards. She has been a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Sparta, NJ. since 2004. She specializes in trauma and about half of her clients are children.

For more information, visit www.healingforchange.com.

Project Sussex Kids, the Sussex County Council for Young Children, has been designed by the New Jersey Department of Children & Families to address the needs of local families who are expecting or who are parenting young children. County Councils for Young Children have been established in all of the state's 21 counties to bring together parents, caregivers, as well as health, education and social service professionals to enhance communication, coordination and collaboration of services. Additional information is available at www.projectsussexkids.org.