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## Family Focus Helping Your Child Age Six and Older Manage Anger - Part Two

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Prior to age six, parents must do the work of providing the structure to contain their child's anger. There needs to be a system of positive reinforcement, rewards, consequences, and restrictions administered by parents in a calm and reasonable manner.

As children become older, a parent dictating terms does not go over very well to say the least, so we need to involve the child in the process of addressing his anger. He still needs to know there are limits that you will impose. For example, you will remove him from a store or restaurant if his voice is continuously raised, you will give him a time-out or more serious consequence at home if he is disrespectful, and so on. But the more you allow him to participate in deciding when and what will take place - with your own set of forced choices inserted - the more he will see that he can have control over his behavior if he chooses.

Anger begets anger. It is important to remember this when you are dealing with an angry child. You will just add fuel to the fire if you become angry too. What helps is accepting that your child is angry (you don't need to agree with him in order to do this), and then helping him articulate what is wrong. The calmer you remain, the shorter-lived the angry episode likely will be.

Parents rightfully complain if a child addresses them disrespectfully while trying to convey his feelings. No one wants to tolerate insults, bad language, or hateful comments. Children need to be instructed on how to bring up hurtful or upsetting issues. But while you are correcting his choice of words, it is important not to shut him down completely as so often can happen. My suggestion is first to

discuss the issue he is upset about, and then address the issue of his language or disrespect.

Let your child know that it is normal and natural to be angry at times; he doesn't feel guilty or bad or wrong. Help him become aware of what caused his anger so that he gets in the habit of thinking about what upsets him. If he knows that it is acceptable to feel angry, he can then try to focus on what bothers him and what he can do about it. It is essential for him to try to pinpoint what triggered his anger.

Then teach him various options to deal with his anger. Talking about anger is always best. Help him figure out which specific people in his life he can approach to discuss his feelings. He needs to be able to visualize going to the person with his problem and getting help with it. This is a form of mental rehearsal.

Help him strategize some sample situations so he can realize that he doesn't need to act on his anger immediately. Suggest that he count to five slowly and then think about what to say or do when a person or situation upsets him. Let him know he will feel much more effective and in control if he avoids speaking or acting impulsively.

A child with strong, visceral responses to anger needs physical outlets. A punching bag is always a great tool, as is clay, woodworking, manual labor, and sufficient exercise every day. Martial arts help children develop self-discipline and self-control. Yoga and meditation can be very calming. Adequate sleep and good nutrition are also important. Children need to learn moderation and self-regulation as early as possible.

The possible link between violent video games, television shows, and movies, and severe anger in children is still being researched and debated. It is a complex issue with no conclusive correlation. But it seems prudent to limit your child's exposure to violent games or videos, and to monitor these activities carefully.

Once a child learns to recognize his anger, he needs to learn how to handle it without taking it out on other people, pets, or inanimate objects such as cars, furniture, walls, etc. He also needs to avoid taking it out on himself through behaviors such as substance abuse, cutting, reckless driving, or underachieving. Look for signs that your child is angry; sometimes anger can go underground and not be easily detected. And sometimes, teens who seem depressed actually have a huge inner reservoir of anger and turmoil.

Matt, the college student I worked with and mentioned in my last column, needed to work hard to recognize and control his anger. He took up running which helped channel his energy in a positive way. He learned not to personalize other people's driving, as if they were going too slowly or cutting in front of him just to frustrate him. They were just either poor drivers or somewhat reckless; this was their problem and didn't have to be his if he kept

his distance. Matt learned to practice relaxation techniques during times when he was tempted to lose his temper. In our sessions, Matt released a lot of anger and hurt over the abusive treatment he received from his father. He gradually was able to redefine himself from a hothead with an explosive temper to a person who understandably had times when he was upset. Best of all, Matt learned how valuable it could be to talk over his frustrations and anger with his girlfriend and others close to him.

If your child has a short fuse, has only occasional meltdowns, and does not cause personal or property damage, you can help him with his anger and self-control. But if your child's temper is affecting his relationship with his family and others or his own well-being, and his anger and rages are out of control, verbally or physically, it is important to seek treatment before this behavior becomes firmly established or escalates.

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[back](#)

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