

ELSA newsletter 3 - Helping your children deal with anger and frustration

Anger and frustration are emotions that we experience all through our lives, but may well be amplified now while we are in lockdown. Being physically confined to the house, not being able to do activities that would normally make us feel good, being away from friends, and competing for technology or adult attention may all increase your child's irritability. So how can we help them handle it?

Accept the feeling, but not the behaviour

Accept that anger is an emotion that we all feel. Recognise when your child is angry, name the feeling, empathise and explain that everybody gets angry sometimes - but that we need to know how to handle our anger safely. Feeling angry is ok, but angry behaviours that hurt other people or ourselves are never ok. You may like to use the "anger rules" of:

Do not hurt other people, don't hurt yourself and Don't damage property, Do talk about it

or adopt your own for your household. (There are lots of printable posters available of "anger rules", e.g. https://connectability.ca/Garage/wp-content/uploads/article_images/anger-rules.jpg)



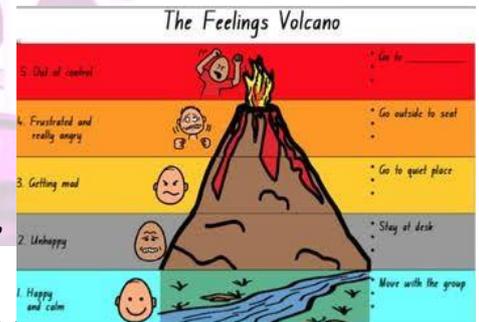
The Anger Iceberg



Try to work out what is underneath your child's anger and think of it like an iceberg. You see the angry behaviour, but just like the greatest part of an iceberg is hidden under water, there will be a lot of feelings "hidden", that are under the surface but being released as anger. <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/media/2241/anger-iceberg.pdf>

Use Imagery

Encourage your child to think of anger like a volcano that rumbles for a while before it eventually explodes, or a firework where the fuse is burning before the actual explosion. Drawing the volcano or firework, and talking about how they feel as their anger starts to "rumble", or the things that ignite their anger "fuse" can help them become more aware of their anger.



If they enjoy craft, they may like making their own 'anger volcano', to help them explain to you the things that make them angry - <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/media/1596/anger-activity.pdf> .

You can also think of anger like a coke bottle being shaken up - lots of little things may annoy us (like the bottle being shaken up) until we eventually explode (like the lid being taken off and the coke spraying everywhere!) If we can spot that our bottle is "being shaken", we can do things to calm down (as if we were releasing the lid a tiny bit at a time) to avoid a big angry explosion. (See my very messy video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w9qMVLnPWA&t=11s>)

Scale their anger

It may seem like your child goes from being completely calm to in a rage within seconds, but there may have been early warning signs that they were starting to get frustrated. At a time when they are calm, try creating an anger 'scale' with them. You can find ready-made scales on the internet <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Capture.png> or <https://www.relaxkids.com/uploads/images/927.png> . or create your own for your child (see the blank template attached). Help them think of the words to describe how they feel at each 'level', what that looks like, and what they can do to make themselves feel better. E.g. For Mrs Farrow,



level 2 is 'frustrated', I notice that my shoulders are tense and my jaw is tight, and I need to take a deep breath and walk away for a minute!

If they, or you, can spot the warning signs that they are at a level 2 or 3, they may be able to take action that avoids getting to a level 5.

Physical Feelings

Help your child spot what their body feels like when they are starting to get angry. Does their face get red, their heart beat faster, their fists clench? When they start to feel these sensations, it's time to use one of their calming strategies.

Calming Strategies

Different strategies work for different children, so help your child try various things to work out what helps. Is it taking a few deep breaths? Counting to 10 forwards and backwards? Tensing and releasing their muscles? Saying a calming phrase to themselves e.g. "Keep cool, keep cool" or "Walk away, walk away"? These all take PRACTICE, so try them out when your child is calm rather than waiting until they are angry. Show them that you have ways to keep calm too - it's good for children to know that adults have feelings, but still need to manage them.

Remember that different strategies will work at different points on the anger 'scale'. Handing your child some playdough may help them soothe themselves if they are a little frustrated, but if they are in a full-on rage, they will probably just throw it at you! Work out with them what helps at each level.

There are lots of lists of calming strategies on the internet, e.g.

<https://store.copingskillsforkids.com/products/coping-skills-checklist>

Safe ways to express anger

Despite your best efforts at helping your child calm themselves while they are at a 'lower' point on the anger scale, sometimes they will still get to a 4 or 5 and be past the point of using a calming strategy. In that case, they need to know what is a safe and acceptable way for them to express their anger, so work that out with them. Can they punch/hit/scream into a pillow? Scribble on, tear or scrunch up newspaper? Jump on the trampoline or stamp around the garden? They will have many angry chemicals (adrenaline and cortisol) in their bodies, filling their muscles with energy, so may well need a safe physical release for this.

While they are this angry, they will not be able to reason with you, so keep words to a minimum, keep everybody safe, and save discussing what has happened, and any sanctions for their behaviour, until they have calmed down. This may well be later in the day, as the adrenaline will stay in their bodies for several hours, and you may 're-trigger' them if you try to talk about it too quickly.

Useful links

NHS advice on dealing with anger in children - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/dealing-with-angry-child/>

Coping skills for kids - managing anger - <https://copingskillsforkids.com/managing-anger>

ELSA Resources A-Z of coping skills - <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/a-z-of-coping-skills/>

Why do we blow our top? Video explaining why we lose control of our emotions:

<https://youtu.be/3bKuoH8CkFc>

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