

When Your Child Gets Mad

“Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to.”—Harriet Goldhor Lerner, American psychologist

Doors slam. Kids yell. Or your child refuses to speak to you—or just wilts. It’s not fun when your child gets mad. Kids can really hurt you when they lash out at you. Yet, it’s important to teach kids how to understand their anger, how to express it in constructive ways, and how to use this powerful emotion to make positive change.

Try it...

For all parents

- Examine your view and comfort with anger. What did your parents teach you about expressing anger? How comfortable are you with the emotion? Some people are quick to lose their cool (and feel comfortable doing so), while others like to avoid any type of anger or conflict. Both extremes are not helpful. What’s important is to learn how to recognize your feelings, make sense of what they’re telling you, and expressing your feelings in a way that clarifies the issue and encourages people to want to work on the issue rather than flee—or lash back.
- Notice what makes you mad—and what makes your kids mad. Are there patterns? It’s easy to assume that kids only get mad when they don’t get their way, but anger is more complicated than that. Your child may get upset when someone picks on another child. Or your child may get mad when she doesn’t get enough time to do art—or play outside.
- Tell your kids that all feelings are acceptable and important. Also say that it’s important to express emotions in ways that are respectful to others. No one likes to be yelled at. Sometimes an angry person needs to calm down before saying something. Teach your kids to slow down and unwind when they get angry.
- A helpful book that shows how to use anger wisely (and not get stuck in blaming) is [*The Dance of Anger*](#) by Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph.D., sold on Amazon.com.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Label your child’s emotions when your child expresses them so that your child can learn what they are. For young children, it’s often best to keep the labels simple, such as mad, sad, and glad. When your child starts to yell or hit, say, “You’re mad. No yelling or hitting when we’re mad. Let’s calm down first and then we’ll talk about why you’re mad.”
- Intervene immediately when children lash out at others in anger. Don’t allow anyone to get hurt just because someone is mad.
- Count aloud to 10 and have your child take slow, deep breaths when he or she gets

angry. Talk about how this helps to calm down the emotion so that you can talk about it later. If your child still isn't calm after counting to 10, count again. Repeat as often as necessary. Sometimes you may need to have your child lie down (and rub his or her back) or just take a break in a quiet place.

- Talk with your kids about the consequences of their anger. It's not too early to get them working on their empathy skills. For example, if your daughter yells and hits another child, calmly explain how her anger made the other child feel. (Maybe the child got hurt, scared, or sad.) Then ask what happens when someone gets mad at her and how it makes her feel.
- After your child is calm, ask simple questions to help your child articulate his or her feelings. Don't be surprised if your child begins to get angry again. (If this happens, do the calming technique again.) Ask questions, such as: What made you mad? What would make it better?

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Talk about anger with your child. Sometimes during the early childhood years, kids learn to suppress their feelings in order to control them. It's important to remind children that everyone has feelings, and that all feelings are normal. (It's the expression of these feelings that often need lots of practice.) If your child has a hard time thinking of what makes him or her mad, talk about what angers you. For example, "I get mad when dinner is late, and my stomach is growling and I'm really hungry," or "I get mad when someone butts into line ahead of me at the grocery store."
- Introduce your child to more emotion labels. For example, sometimes anger is actually frustration or being enraged or even being bored. One fun poster that shows 30 feelings and comical faces for each emotion is the [Feelings Poster](#) from Free Spirit.
- Check in with your child's teacher about your child's expression of anger and other emotions. Some children act differently at school than they do at home. If there are any concerns, work together to create a plan that will help your child.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Don't panic if your child begins lashing out in anger in inappropriate ways again. (Some parents think, "Didn't this kid learn anything from me during the past decade? Why is he (or she) doing this now?") Puberty can set your child off balance and overload your child's emotional circuits. Thus door slamming, screaming, and other inappropriate expressions can occur. Try to remain calm (although this is not easy) and ask your child (once he or she is calm) what's bothering him or her. Be clear about appropriate ways to express anger (such as running around the block, pounding on a pillow, or yelling while vacuuming), and keep teaching these messages over and over.
- If your child is emotionally savvy, talk about how many people can experience two or three different emotions at once. The term "bittersweet" acknowledges the feeling of loss and also warm feelings at the same time.
- Some kids need a physical release for their strong emotions. Channel it in positive ways, such as having them learn one of the martial arts (karate, kung fu, tae kwon do, or fencing) or by playing a sport that gets them to move their body a lot (such as soccer, long-distance running, skiing, etc.).

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Model and teach your teenager more complex methods of conflict resolution, such as consensus, collaboration, compromise, and so on. Find out more at [Mind Tools](#).
- Talk about respecting and valuing other people's views, especially those that differ from your own. If your family enjoys debate, create a debate where each family member has to convince others of the "opposite" of one of his or her beliefs. This helps you clarify your own views and also see the merit in other people's views.
- Examine the justice issues that make your teenager mad (and make you mad too). Some get upset about global warming. Others become angry when people don't vote. As a family, talk about the issues that anger you and why. Then see if there's something you can do to make a step toward positive change.
- Be open about the positive steps you're making to resolve an issue that makes you mad. For example, if the bank slaps you with an unfair finance charge, show your teenager how you're providing written documentation in your defense, how you're talking with people at the bank who can help you (and being calm and assertive while you do this), how you're following up if the response seems slow, and how you thank people for helping you along the way. Moving from anger to positive change is a slow, complicated process, and showing your teenager the steps you take will help him or her in the long run.