

Controlling explosions

Márianna Csóti has some practical exercises to show children how to manage their anger, develop positive relationships and deal with life challenges in a more constructive way.

When children unleash anger in an uncontrolled way, they lose out. Angry children are not happy children: they may have feelings of depression, frustration, hurt, jealousy, low self-esteem, self-hatred and anxiety. This article is concerned with helping children understand and manage their anger to develop positive relationships and to deal with life challenges in a more constructive way.

Some children have difficulty understanding how their behaviour affects other people's feelings because they have, for example, an autism spectrum disorder. For them, it can be more helpful to explain what to do, and what not to do, and the reasons why. For these children, use the exercises below as a guide to structure a more formal lesson rather than a lesson based on discussion and role plays as described below.

Exercise 1

Give examples of different angry behaviour in the following groups: verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm and vandalism. [Write their answers where they can all see them. Suggestions are given below.]

Verbal Abuse

- Swearing.
- Name-calling.
- Shouting or screaming. (Can include throwing a tantrum.)
- Sarcasm.
- Putting someone down.

Physical Abuse

- Hitting.
- Kicking.
- Punching.
- Hair-pulling.
- Arm-twisting.
- Biting.
- Scratching.
- Pulling to the ground.

Self-Harm

- Cutting yourself.
- Knocking your head against a wall.
- Biting yourself.
- Starving yourself.
- Overeating.
- Over-drinking.
- Taking illegal drugs.

- Solvent-sniffing.
- Stealing.
- Isolating yourself and withdrawing from social contact.
- Punishing yourself in any other way.

Vandalism

- Smashing things.
- Kicking things.
- Pulling things off the wall.
- Tearing or ripping things up.
- Setting fire to things.
- Ripping electrical equipment from wall sockets.
- Spray-painting buildings.
- Urinating (weeing), or defecating (pooing), in inappropriate places.

Exercise 2

What are the consequences of these different types of angry behaviour?

The consequences of verbal and physical abuse:

- They create aggression in the other person (but if he or she is too timid to fight back, you become a bully).
- Your behaviour builds up hatred on both sides; it would not be easy to be friends again.
- The aggression, on both sides, might spiral out of control and the situation could result in serious injury or even death.

The consequences of self-harm:

- You hurt yourself physically.
- You hurt yourself psychologically (or emotionally). It lowers your self-esteem to damage your body by not taking care of it or by deliberately hurting it.
- You may become depressed.
- You may become addicted (to substances or to damaging eating patterns).
- You may become lonely.
- You may lose your friends.

The consequences of vandalism:

- You may damage something you, or someone close to you, values.
- You may damage your body doing it.
- You may be made to buy replacements or pay for repairs or cleaning.
- You may be arrested if you damage public property.
- You may end up with a police record.

- You do not learn to respect other people's property or the public's right to have certain services (such as the use of a public telephone).

Exercise 3

What do you get out of using any of the above angry behaviour? (Negative and positive things.)

Positive:

- You relieve your frustration.
- You let your anger 'burn out'.
- It is a way of showing people that you are hurting inside.

Negative:

- You have increased your aggression.
- You have increased the other person's aggression.
- You have made a fool of yourself – letting people see you out of control.
- You have produced a situation of conflict.
- You have built a wall of hatred between you and another person.
- You would not have got your argument across – you were too busy abusing the person.
- You would have produced a situation that is not easy to repair.
- You would have lost a friend (or potential friend). Or you may have damaged the relationship you have with someone else.
- If you have self-harmed you may need medical attention. It severely damages your self-esteem when you turn your anger in on yourself and you may need professional help.
- If you have vandalised something, you might be arrested, or be made to pay for the damage you have done. You might have broken something irreplaceable that hurts your – or someone else's - feelings.
- Your behaviour has not solved the original problem. Most of the negative consequences are long-lived – you will have to deal with them long after the situation has passed. So, for just a short burst of uncontrolled anger, you have brought much trouble on yourself.

Exercise 4

Sometimes anger is absolutely understandable and justifiable. In such cases, it is not a problem unless it gets out of control and someone gets physically hurt. This is a 'normal' use of anger. But for other people, they are in a state of aggression where the slightest thing can push them into a very angry state, one that is totally out of proportion to the event that caused it.

Why are some people 'angry people'? (There may be several factors that work together to build up a person's anger.)

Suggestions:

- They have had many things go wrong in their life and life has been tough for them.

- They have often been hurt and they feel like lashing out at others, wanting others to suffer too.
- They live with angry people and so have learnt to act in an aggressive way.
- They see someone react violently to something that later happens to themselves – and they then feel the pent up anger and frustration of this other person and react in the same way. (A good example of this is using exactly the same angry words as your parent has used with you – or copying the actions of a person in a film.)
- They have a low self-esteem and get more easily upset about things than a happy confident person would. They might be aggressive to cover up their hurt and bad feelings about themselves.
- They feel frustrated that they can't get, or do something, they really want.
- They feel unable to control events around them. (They feel powerless in their own life so go to great lengths to have an effect over something else.)
- They bottle up their feelings until they 'explode' – a small event that someone else might not think anything of may trigger an enormous reaction because it is, for the person, the 'last straw'.
- They feel unable to cope with something that has happened, or is happening, to them such as their parents splitting up or divorcing or breaking up with a best friend.
- They have a big disappointment that they can't handle such as something previously promised to them later being denied.
- They are not good at sharing their problems or their feelings with someone else.
- They have no one else to share their problems and feelings with.
- They have been pushed beyond what they can stand such as being abused, bullied or over-pressurised and they take out their emotional pain on others they see as weaker than themselves, or on themselves.

Exercise 5

How does being angry affect your life?

Suggestions:

- It doesn't always get me what I want.
- I feel bad afterwards.
- I feel ashamed of the way I have behaved after the event.
- I am losing friends because of it.
- My life at home is harder because of it – my parents have lost patience with me and my siblings (brothers and sisters) have shut me out of their lives.

What kind of a person do people think you are?

Suggestions:

- I've got a name for myself - people now expect me to 'fly off the handle'.
- People avoid me because they think I'm trouble.

Preparation for exercise 6

Print the two role plays below on separate pieces of paper. Choose two children to play the small part outlined below, explaining to them beforehand what the scene is about. Mum should start calm, only getting angry when James (or Joanna) behaves angrily.

After the role play, there are discussion questions for the class. Then a second role play, to show how things could be done differently. Explain to the children how their behaviour should change for this second role play so that there is a clear contrast between the two.

Role play 1

Mum: I know your behaviour has been very good lately and that's why I said you could have your friend to tea on Saturday but I forgot that you need new trainers for school. We'll have to go to buy those instead. There's no other time this weekend for your friend to come.

James: That's not fair! You've broken your promise. Well, I'm not going to keep my promises either. Stuff the new trainers, I don't want them.

You're a liar! You hadn't meant to invite my friend in the first place.

Mum: That's not true. He can come another weekend. You are ungrateful. You don't deserve new trainers, but you have to have them as the others have fallen apart.

Go to your room and get out of my sight. I'm telling your dad about your behaviour when he gets home.

What are the consequences of James' anger?

- James and Mum felt bad about what happened for a long time after.
- They both stayed angry.
- James got pulled round the shops; Mum hardly spoke to him.
- James got into more trouble when Dad got home.
- James would be forced to apologise.

Role play 2

Mum: I know your behaviour has been very good lately and that's why I said you could have your friend to tea on Saturday but I forgot that you need new trainers for school. We'll have to go to buy those instead. There's no other time this weekend for your friend to come.

James: (Holds his breath for a short while to stop him from speaking. Counts from ten down to zero. Shows the disappointment on his face.)

I feel very angry and disappointed. I was really looking forward to my friend coming. I don't feel like going shopping. I feel so grumpy and angry with you.

Mum: I know. I understand. It's my fault because I forgot about your trainers. I'll make it up to you. Your friend can come another time. (Hugs James.)

James: When can he come then?

Mum: How about next Saturday? And, I'll even take you to the cinema.

What are the consequences of behaving like this?

- Mum is prepared to listen to James' point of view.
- She offers sympathy and says she understands James' disappointment.
- She apologises for having to change the plan.
- She suggests another time James' friend can come.
- She tries to comfort James by hugging him.
- She suggests an even bigger treat the following weekend.

What gets you more – being angry or staying calm?

Note

James is forgiving of his mum's forgetfulness. Much of anger management is about accepting that people are not perfect – including yourself.

Help bring your anger under control

- Count to ten or twenty, forwards or backwards, to stop your immediate response of lashing out in some way.
- Briefly hold your breath to stop you blurting out something you may later regret.
- When you are angry, your heart starts to race. Try to get your heartbeat back to normal by consciously relaxing and thinking calm thoughts.
- Try to relax your muscles.

Tell yourself:

- I should talk to someone about what's happened and how I feel.
- I'm tired, I'm probably overreacting.
- I've had a bad day. I mustn't take that out on someone else.
- If I lose control, I won't get anywhere – I know because I've tried it that way before.
- I should concentrate on the problem, not how I feel.

Ask yourself:

- Does it really matter?
- Am I being unreasonable?
- Am I being fair?
- Should I accept some responsibility for what has happened?
- Am I being honest with myself?

Exercise 7

Think of a time when you were very angry then write down your answers to these questions:

What made me angry?

What did I do?

What were the consequences?

Was it worth being angry in this way? (Did something positive come out of it?)

How could I have done things differently?

What would have been the consequences of doing things differently?

The positive side to anger

- It lets you know that there's something wrong and you need to do something about it.
- It fires you up for making a positive change in your life, or for taking positive action such as making a complaint.
- It shows that there is something amiss within a relationship and can show a friend, or partner, that a problem needs to be discussed. It can then spark off new ground rules for a better relationship.
- It can get rid of the bad feelings you have – such as when you scream and hit a pillow to take out your frustration without damaging anyone. Afterwards, you may feel calm and better able to think clearly about what needs to be done to improve things. However, for anger to have positive consequences, you need to use it in a channelled way so that it works for you, not against you.

Anger management is about finding alternative solutions and working with others (not against them). Another important aspect of anger management is that of being able to forgive: people's weaknesses, their failings and their past mistakes. It is also vital to forgive yourself and see yourself as a loveable person.

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