

# Plain Talk

## About how to deal with an angry child



### ***Anger - it's a fact of life.***

Everybody gets angry. You do, and so does your child. But figuring out what to do with that anger is tough. It makes parenting one of the hardest jobs in the world.

### ***What do you do with an angry child?***

Letting your anger or your child's get out of hand is dangerous. But so is hiding it. Hidden anger smolders until it explodes later "for no good reason."

### ***The first thing you can do is get control over your own feelings.***

It will help if you think of your job at that moment as a teaching job. Little Jimmy or Susy probably doesn't understand the strong feelings building up inside, doesn't know what to do with them, and may be frightened at the sense of going out of control.

In fact, anger is often a substitute for some other feeling the child can't identify. A child may act angrily when the real problem is deeper and more frightening: a feeling of failure, low self-worth, loneliness, boredom, fear, confusion, or even sadness. If you can help your child discover the feeling that lies under the anger, and talk with him or her about it, the anger is likely to lessen or even disappear.

### ***Remember that anger is natural.***

It's a normal feeling like hunger, happiness, or sadness. Your child has a right to feel and express anger. So do you.

### ***But anger is different from aggression.***

Aggression is an attempt to hurt someone or destroy something. It infringes on the rights of others. This distinction may help you react appropriately to the many upsetting things an angry child may do.

### ***Here are some suggestions for dealing with an angry child.***

Some are designed to help the child avoid unnecessarily frustrating situations. Some are on-the-spot actions you can take when you see your child is having a problem.

### ***Catch your child being good.***

Every day, find lots of ways to praise your child's good behavior - and you'll start seeing more of it. Some examples: "I really liked it that you came in for dinner today without being reminded." "Thanks for hanging up your clothes after school." "You sure were patient when I was on the phone." "Thanks for telling the truth about what really happened."

### ***Ignore inappropriate behavior that can be tolerated.***

Ignoring it is one way of showing the child that the behavior is inappropriate. Don't ignore the child, just the behavior.

### ***Make it easy for your child to be good.***

Give him or her plenty of opportunity for physical exercise to let off extra energy. Plan surroundings so that unnecessary temptations aren't there. Make sure the child isn't "crowded in" by cramped physical space or overly confining rules and regulations.

### ***Use closeness and touching.***

A sudden hug or show of affection may help an angry child regain control. You can move physically closer to a child to calm him or her and help the child curb the angry impulse.



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## **Say “NO!”**

In order to stay within limits, a child needs a clear idea of what those limits are and needs to be free to operate within them.

## **Explain situations.**

Understanding a situation can help a child understand the cause of the anger and begin to calm down. Your explanation can include telling the child how you feel and asking for consideration. Example: “Playing your drum usually doesn’t bother me, but today I have a headache. Could you please do something else?”

## **Help your child build a good self-image.**

If Johnny is convinced he is a “bad boy,” you can be sure he will act like one. He needs to know he is valued, that he has strengths as well as weaknesses, that he can reach his goals, that his angry feelings don’t make him a bad person.

## **Teach your child to express anger in words.**

Talking is an acceptable steam valve and helps the child avoid “blowing up.” If Susy feels free to tell her little brother, “I don’t feel like sharing right now,” and that feeling is respected, chances are she isn’t going to hit him the minute you turn your back. Teach her to put angry feelings into words instead of fists.

## **Be a good model.**

If you hit Susy because she hit her baby brother, will she believe you when you say it’s wrong to hit people?

## **Use physical restraint - carefully.**

Sometimes physical restraint is necessary to stop children from hurting themselves, or others, and may help them save face. Physical restraint should not be a punishment or display of angry behavior by you, or provide a chance for other children to ridicule your child. Neither should it hurt a child physically or emotionally. Restraint is simply a way of saying, “You can’t do that.”

## **Use punishment cautiously.**

Your rule might be “Is this punishment educational, or is it just a way for me to let off steam?” Cool off some other way and then decide what action is needed to correct your child’s behavior.

## **Help is not far away.**

If you think you’re in a situation you can’t handle, don’t hesitate to get help. Maybe you need to talk to a spouse or friend or neighbor.

**For a free Positive Parenting Kit  
call 1-866-640-3936.**

**For parent education and support groups in your area,  
call your County Extension Family Living Agent or  
Prevent Child Abuse Wisconsin  
214 N. Hamilton Street  
Madison, WI 53703  
(608) 256-3374**

## **You can call a parental help line for assistance.**

In Milwaukee, call (414) 671-0566

In Madison, call (608) 241-2221

If you want professional counseling,  
call a local social service agency or county social  
services/human services department.

If the agency you call doesn’t offer the kind of service  
you want, ask to be referred somewhere else.



**Wisconsin Council on Children and Families**

16 N. Carroll Street, Suite 600

Madison, WI 53703

(608) 284-0580

[www.wccf.org](http://www.wccf.org)

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