

A Psychological Guide for Families: Anger in Childhood

Child & Family Psychological Health Service

Introduction

This leaflet is part of a series of leaflets written by Psychologists in the Gwent Child and Family Service. The aim of this leaflet is to help parents and children who are coping with anger. It introduces ideas about how anger affects our bodies, why people get angry, ideas about how to manage anger in day-to-day life and recommends some books that have helped other families to deal with anger. If, after reading this and trying the ideas suggested, you feel that you need further help and/or advice there is a list of contacts at the back.

Anger is Normal

Everybody can feel anger. It is a normal and useful emotion. It can let us know that something is wrong. It can help us to feel stronger and give us energy, and it may protect us in frightening situations or help us to solve problems.

When anger is expressed in a healthy way it can provide an opportunity for learning and change. If anger is expressed in a way that respects the other person's point of view, even if it is different from one's own, it can have a positive effect.

It is important to understand that anger as an emotion is not dangerous, but that aggressive behaviour that can come with anger may be.

What do Children get Angry About?

Children can feel and show anger in different ways as they grow up:-

Toddlers

At this age children start to become more independent. They want to be able to do things that they don't have the skills for, and their lack of communication skills can add to their frustration. They may express their frustration at this by kicking, screaming and having a tantrum.

School Aged

School age children have a lot to cope with. They are learning lots of different things such as academic knowledge, how to socialise and how to manage their emotions. At this age, children also often start to compare themselves to other children.

They begin to feel the need to belong and form close friendships, but these friendships can also be triggers for anger. The ins and outs of friendship can make children feel insecure through teasing, bullying, jealousy, feeling 'left out' or lonely. If children don't feel secure in their friendships, they can feel unhappy or frustrated, and this might show up as angry behaviour.

Adolescence

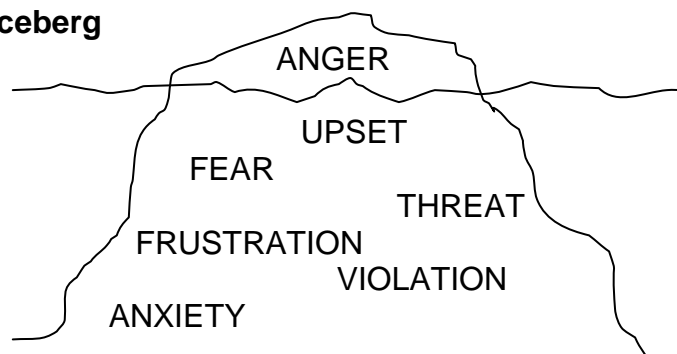
Adolescence brings with it a new set of tasks to learn and new worries. Young people at this stage are developing a new level of independence; they are developing and experimenting with their identity. Not surprisingly any conflict or stress can be to do with whether they feel they have enough control over their lives.

Understandably, friendship groups become more important during adolescence because young people can share each others' experiences. Therefore the need for acceptance and belonging becomes even more important than at other stages of childhood. This need can bring with it a lot of sensitivity. This sensitivity along with their emerging sense of identity and the physical changes of puberty may increase angry feelings and outbursts.

Events that effect all ages

There are situations and events that can result in anger regardless of how old we are, such as the death of a loved one, divorce and separation, bullying and abuse. These events can shake a young person's sense of safety and trust. If this happens the person may feel scared and look out for any other dangers. As mentioned earlier, anger can be useful because it alerts us to danger. However, it might also have the opposite effect to what the young person needs; by pushing other people away.

The Anger Iceberg

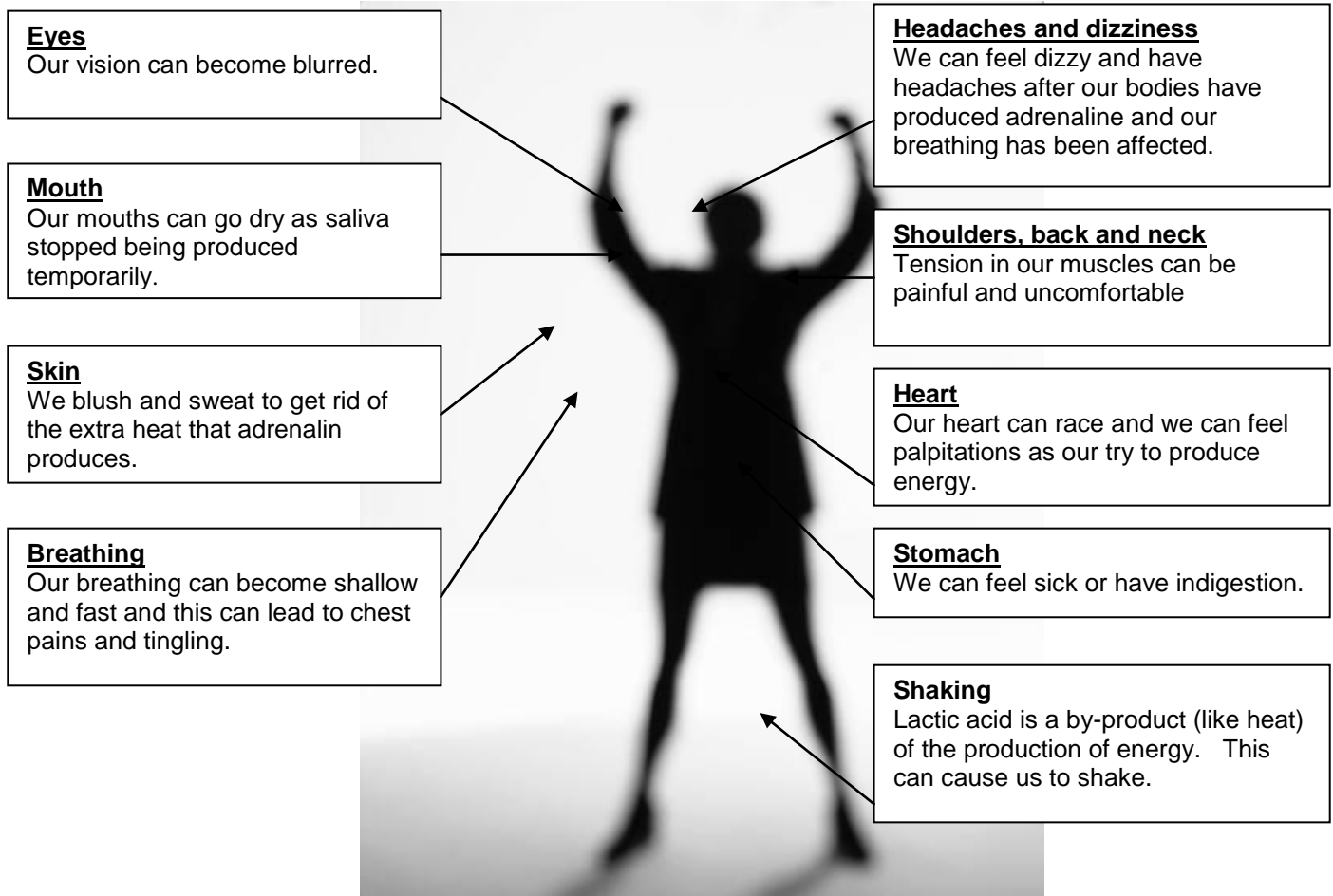


Some people say it can be useful to think of an iceberg, with anger being the top part of the iceberg that can be seen above the water, and all of the other things that lead to anger being the part of the iceberg under the water. Although they can be hard to see, they may be important parts of why anger is around.

Anger and our Bodies

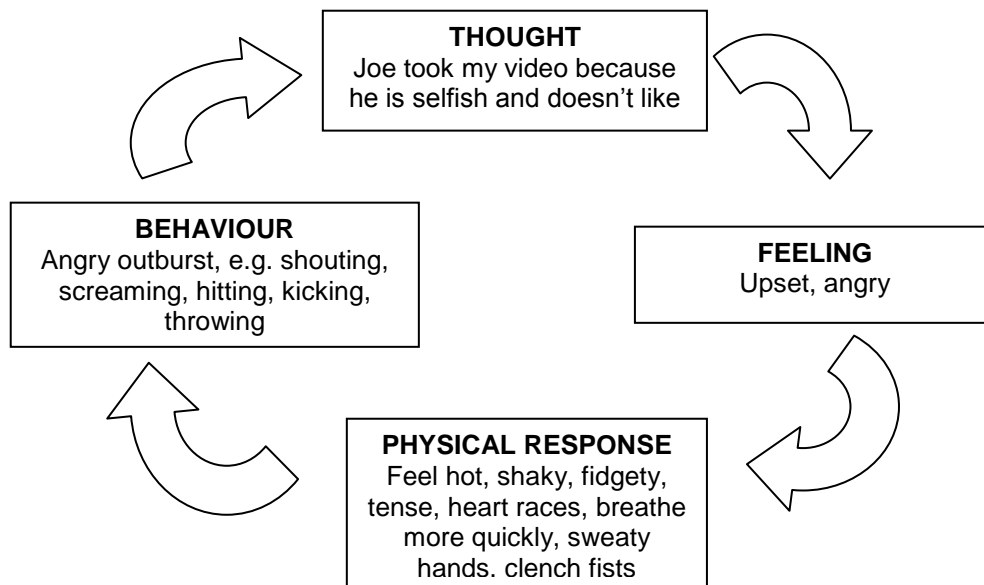
Angry outbursts are affected by our thoughts, feelings and physical changes in our bodies. When we think that we are under threat our bodies need to prepare us to protect ourselves. They prepare us to stay and fight or to 'take flight' and run away.

Our brains send messages to different parts of our bodies. For example, our breathing speeds up so that we can take in more oxygen, this speeds up our heart rate so that more oxygen can get to our muscles quicker to make us stronger. It also releases a chemical called adrenaline which makes us react faster. The diagram below shows all of the changes that happen in our bodies when we get angry.



These changes in our bodies also happen when we are excited or nervous. These changes are normal and usually help us to perform better, for example, they help athletes run faster. However, if these changes are produced when there are angry thoughts and feelings, they can lead us to behave aggressively.

An example of how angry thoughts, feelings, physical Responses and behaviour are linked



The example above may help people around the angry person to understand the process that can happen within a person when he/she is having an angry outburst. The next section will tell you more about the stages of anger. We hope that this will help you to help at each stage.

Trigger Stage

This is when the person has thoughts and feelings that begin to raise their anger. It is when the person sees an incident as threatening. This can include threats to self-esteem or self-image as well as threats to personal safety or property.

It is best to try to help young people at this very early stage because they have not yet become so physically 'fired up' that they are incapable of listening or responding to others. Once the body has prepared for 'fight or flight' or has reached exploding point it is much harder to change the course of events.

Escalation Stage

This is when the body is physically preparing itself for 'fight or flight'. Adrenaline is released, muscles tense, breathing becomes rapid and blood pressure rises. Although it is possible to change the person's behaviour at this stage, it is difficult because the person is less able to think clearly and rationally.

Crisis Stage

At this stage the person is almost unable to think clearly or to understand other people's thoughts and feelings. Therefore trying to help at this stage is often difficult. Instead, it is often better to try to keep the person and those around them safe until their outburst is over.

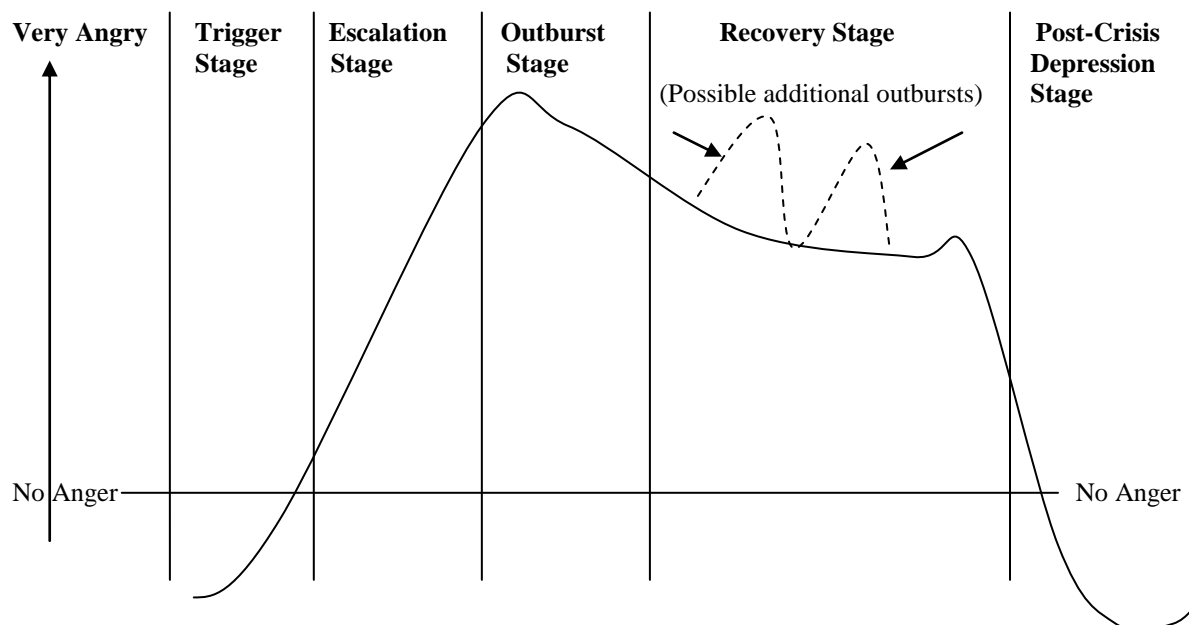
Recovery Stage

This is when the anger starts to go away. It takes time for the body to return to normal and therefore other outbursts can easily get set off again. At this stage the person may also feel vulnerable, confused and also potentially guilty. These emotions may feel threatening to the young person and trigger another angry outburst. Therefore, it can be helpful to allow them some space before trying to talk things over or giving out any consequences.

Post-Crisis/Depression Stage

This is the stage where the body needs to recover and rest following its outburst. The person's ability to listen and think clearly begins to come back. The person often feels guilty about what they've done, which can lead to unhappy feelings about themselves. The person might need some reassurance that they are still ok and loved. However, they may also need to have a consequence to learn that their behaviour is not acceptable. It may also help at this stage, to talk to about other, better ways that the person could have shown their anger instead of through aggressive behaviour.

The Stages of Anger



As described above there are better and worse times to try to help in the anger process; better times are at either side of the outburst, not during the outburst. One way of learning about angry outbursts is to keep a diary of them that lists the circumstances around each outburst. The diary can help identify the pattern of the young person's outbursts and thus help in preparing for them and changing them.

Early Warning Signs:

- Physical agitation – pacing up and down, fiddling with objects, twitching legs
- Change in facial expression
- Change in eye contact
- Change in body posture
- Change in facial colouring

- Change in tone of voice
- Verbal challenges
- Over-sensitivity to suggestions or criticisms
- Rapid mood swings

Strategies to manage anger in the early stages:

- Distraction techniques – anything that distracts the person from their own distress, e.g. for younger children it may be playing with a favourite toy, for older children it may be giving them a positive task to do (not as a punishment).
- Activities that help the person relax or use up the extra energy the body is starting to generate.
- Calm discussion or negotiation – this allows the person to feel they are being heard and that their opinions are valued, which in turn encourages feelings of control. If they can feel control in a positive and constructive way they are less likely to try to gain it through angry outbursts.
- Stay calm/model appropriate behaviour – if the adult becomes angry the young person is very likely to mirror that behaviour and thus the situation will escalate to an outburst.
- Avoid saying things to the person that devalues them such as ‘don’t be silly’ or ‘don’t start that’. This is likely to provoke more anger.
- Relocation – if the situation is identified as causing the distress and therefore subsequent anger, it may be appropriate to remove the person from the situation and give them time to cool down.
- Prompt the young person – tell them that they seem to be getting angry and suggest that they try to relax until they feel calm enough to talk through what is upsetting them.

Crisis Management

During the outburst the young person may have lost the ability to think rationally. Therefore the most appropriate action in the crisis phase is to ensure the young person’s safety and the safety of those around them. Below are some tips on how to deal with an angry outburst during the crisis phase:

Do:

- Remain controlled – keeping very quiet may be unhelpful because it may make the young person think that you do not recognise their problems and thus frustrate them more leading to further increase in anger. However, getting as angry as they are is also unhelpful as it can cloud our judgement. Try to let the young person know that you recognise their feelings but want the situation to calm down.
- Talk firmly with clear directions, e.g. ‘stop that now’ or ‘put that down’.

- Keep a safe distance – young people who behave in a violent way tend to need more space than others.
- Acknowledge the person's anger, e.g. 'I can see you feel really strongly about this.'

Don't:

- Use confrontational body language – side by side is less confrontational than face to face.
- Engage in prolonged or exaggerated eye contact.
- Use confrontational or provocative language, e.g. 'stop being so childish', 'act your age' or 'go on then, do it'. This type of language is likely to frustrate the person more.

Debriefing

Debriefing can be very useful in helping young people. When you and the young person are calm it is often helpful to talk about what triggered the outburst, and how to deal with that situation and/or angry outbursts in the future. It is important that the young person is aware that their behaviour was not acceptable. However, it is also important that the young person's views are listened to, valued and discussed if a solution is to be reached. It can help when the other people involved discuss their part in the outburst, e.g. apologising if they got angry too or discussing how they could be more understanding of the young person in the future to prevent an outburst.

Teaching Young People and Adults to Manage their Own Anger

These are 'mini-strategies' that can be taught to children, and adults, to use to prevent anger building up or getting out of control. These should be used when the trigger has been spotted but before any outburst:

- Count to 10 (or even 100!) SLOWLY before taking action. Counting allows us to focus our thoughts on something other than the thoughts making us angry.
- Exercise – activities involving movement burn up any energy the body has started to create.
- Use the 'stuck CD' technique (e.g. keep telling the person provoking you 'I feel hurt when you call me names but I'm going to ignore it'). This interrupts the anger cycle at the thoughts stage.
- Walk away.
- Tell someone who can help.

- Physical relaxation - This is an exercise that involves tensing and relaxing your muscles.
 1. Find a quiet place, free from interruptions
 2. Get comfortable - lying down is best
 3. Concentrate on your breathing...in and out...
 4. Start with your HANDS and ARMS and then move right down your body clenching and relaxing all of your muscle groups from FACE and NECK to YOUR FEET and TOES. Finish off with a WHOLE BODY tense.
 5. TENSE the different muscles as hard as you can
 6. Hold for about 5 seconds.....and then RELAX
 7. How different do your muscles feel when they are tensed or relaxed?

For younger children, who may not understand the terms "tense" and "relax", you can also add the image "like a robot" and "like a rag doll".

- Quick relaxation exercises –
 - Arms and hands:* Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you.
 - Legs and feet:* Push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs, and stretch them out in front of you.
 - Stomach:* Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it.
 - Shoulders:* Scrunch up your shoulders.
 - Neck:* Push your head back against the chair or bed.
 - Face:* Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together.
- Controlled Breathing - Anxiety often causes rapid breathing. Learning to control breathing will be a really helpful skill for your child to develop.
 1. Find a quiet place, free from interruptions.
 2. Get comfortable - either lying or sitting.
 3. Close your eyes and place your hand on your stomach.
 4. Focus on your breathing.
 5. Take a long slow breath in.
 6. Take a long slow breath out.
 7. Try and concentrate on the air filling your lungs and then slowly coming back out.
 8. Feel your stomach move in and out with each breath (this is important - with deep relaxed breathing, it is your stomach that moves and not your chest).
 9. Repeat.
 10. Practice breathing for 5-15 minutes a day.

Tip: Ask your child to think of a colour that makes him/her feel comfortable and relaxed. With eyes closed, have him/her visualise breathing in that colour through his/her nose and into his/her lungs. Guide him/her to visualise the colour moving down to reach all parts of his/her body, more and more, with each breath, until he/she is filled with the peaceful colour and is totally relaxed and in control.

- Self-talk – use buzz words (e.g. 'cool') to trigger positive thinking (e.g. 'I can cope with this...I've done it before and I can get past this positively').
- Visual scene – Ask your child to think about their dream (safe/magic) place. It could be somewhere they have been or an imaginary place. Get them to imagine a picture of it and make the picture as restful and peaceful as possible. Ask them to make the picture as real as they can, by prompting them to imagine the colours, the smells and the sounds of the place, e.g. hear the noise of the sea, feel the wind in their hair, the smell of the trees, the feel of the sunshine on their face.
- Guide your child to practice imagining their relaxing places, and if they start to feel angry, they can try turning the picture on. Ask them to bring to mind a picture of their restful scene and see if it helps them to relax.
- Distraction – this works in the same way as the counting technique. When distracted to a different activity we think less about the things making us angry.

Prevention rather than Management

- Listen to the young person's point of view; understand they are entitled to their point of view. If their view differs from yours, it may help to negotiate; define the problem, think together about alternative solutions, then together, choose the solution that suits both of you. Negotiation teaches the young person how to resolve conflict calmly.
- Say what you mean, mean what you say – give clear, positive instructions (e.g. 'I want you to get your book now') and then **give praise**.
- Praise – catch the young person being good. Instead of responding to negative behaviour, respond to all of their good behaviour.
- Rules – Let the young person know in advance what the rules are and what is expected of them. Explain the reasons for these rules and be prepared to negotiate on rules if appropriate, i.e. as the young person is getting older.
- Consequences - If the young person does not comply with the rules repeat your request calmly and give a warning. If the young person does not respond give the consequence that you warned them about. Be prepared by thinking through appropriate consequences beforehand.
- Notice your non-verbal communication – we all respond to each other's emotions. If a child sees that your face looks angry he/she may respond defensively, by being aggressive.
- Teach calm conflict resolution – children learn from watching their parents. If your child sees you resolving conflict with others without getting angry, they are likely to copy this behaviour.

- Don't discipline when you're angry – because adults go through the same anger process as young children. Therefore, when you are angry your judgement is clouded and you lose the ability to make clear and fair decisions.
- Identify triggers and make plans to avoid them in the future.
- Notice what goes well when you have avoided an outburst – think of what you can learn from this for the next time.

Where can I get more help?

If you feel you have tried all you can and things are not improving for your child you may want to look for further help.

Health Care Professionals (Health Visitor, School Health Nurse, General Practitioner, Clinical Psychologist) – can help you and your child to talk through problems you are having.

Bibliotherapy Scheme – is a scheme that runs throughout Gwent. It is a scheme through which health care professionals, can recommend books to parents which may help them with the difficulties they face. Parents take a written recommendation to any library in Gwent and in return are given the recommended book. You do not have to be a member of the library and you do not have to pay for the recommendation.

Parentline offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers
01702 559900 www.parentline.co.uk

Books for Parents – specific to Anger

- ❖ **Taming the Dragon in your child** by Meg Eastman and Sydney Rozen.
- ❖ **The Explosive Child** by Ross W Greene PhD (age range 5-16 years).

Books for Parents – general parenting techniques including dealing with Anger

- ❖ **The House of Tiny Tearaways** by Dr Tanya Byron (age range 1-7)
- ❖ **New Toddler Training** by Dr Christopher Greene (age range 0-4)
- ❖ **Raising Happy Children** by Jan Parker and Jan Stimpson (age range 0-11)
- ❖ **The Parenting Puzzle** by Candida Hunt (age range 3-12+)

The books recommended are available to buy or can be loaned from the library. Aneurin Bevan Health Board (ABHB) also runs a scheme whereby health professionals can recommend books to parents. Parents can then loan the recommended books from any library in Gwent without having to be a library member.

