

7 Ways to Minister Peace to Angry Kids

In the past three years John and I have adopted seven children from foster care, which means we've had to deal with a lot of angry kids.

Anger displays itself in many ways. I've had children yelling, screaming, kicking, fighting, and throwing things. I've seen looks of pure hatred directed at me. (I know the meaning of "if looks can kill"!)

I've been told things like, "You're not my mom!" "I'm going to call my caseworker!" and "I want to leave!" Anger has been directed at me, my husband, and our other kids.

I've learned that anger stinks, and anger doesn't make anyone feel good—even the angry kids. I've also learned that if kids are allowed to make anger a habit, it perpetuates an environment that is unhealthy for all involved.

Here are four things I've learned about anger, and seven ways to combat it:

1. Kids get angry outwardly because they feel out of control inwardly. Venting anger—or raging—may feel good for a short time, but deep inside a child often feels bad about his words and action. To feel better about himself, a child may justify his anger, believing he had no choice but to be angry. Soon he may believe that's who he is: an angry person.

2. Children who get angry do so because they are missing basic skills. "Coping skills" should be learned and developed from a young age, but sometimes they aren't. For a typical 2-year-old, when a toy is taken and anger arises, there is a parent nearby who teaches things like sharing, taking turns, and how

to settle down. Children a little older are taught to put themselves in another person's shoes. If a child doesn't learn these skills, they instead respond in anger.

3. Kids who get angry often blame others for their problems. (And sometimes—such as in the case of kids being in foster care—there are many people to point a finger at.) These children have a hard time seeing they have problems, too. They don't take responsibility for their actions, which means they're quick to repeat them.

4. Internal anger is just as damaging as external anger. Instead of exploding, some kids just hold everything inside. Bottled up, this anger it eats away at them, giving them a darkened view of everything, not just the one thing they were originally angry at.

How I've learned to deal with angry kids:

1. Spend one-on-one, quality time together. As we've heard it said before, "Prevention is better than a cure." Kids are often quick to get angry because it gets our attention. To kids, even negative attention is better than no attention at all. When dealing with angry kids, our therapist has instructed me to spend 5-15 minutes A DAY of uninterrupted time with the child. This includes playing what the child wants, focusing on his words (and repeating them back), and praising the child for positive behaviors. Not only does this give the child much-needed attention, but it also builds the relationship between parent and child in positive ways.

2. Understand that a moment of anger is only a moment of anger. A moment is not a lifetime sentence, even though our mind is quick to take us there. "We continually need to stay in touch with our fears of the future in order to stay fully in the present with our children—in a place of love," says Heather Forbes, author of *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control*. "When we start creating fearful stories of our

children as dangerous teenagers or adult criminals, we put our children in an unfair and unsafe spotlight.” Instead of allowing myself to allow a moment of anger to fill me with fears for the future, I’ve learned to see it for what it is: one out-of-control moment.

3. Do not escalate with your child. The best way to deal with an angry kid is to stay calm—no matter how hard it is. *When you get angry, your child becomes a victim to your anger and is then able to justify her own anger.* When you escalate, your child often goes “up” in anger to exceed yours, and soon no one is in control. Sometimes parental anger is learned from our growing-up years (which was my case), and we have to learn our own coping skills to deal with it. Other times we just want to win the fight. (Who doesn’t want to win?) But parents win when they stay calm. Not only does this allow the child to calm more quickly, but parents can also maintain control.

4. Ignore anger. As hard as is, sometimes the best way to help a child to overcome anger is simply to ignore it. Anger can become an unhealthy cycle. A child gets angry and lashes out. They run into their room, slam the door, and say all types of unhealthy things. (Or for those who hold it in, they think all types of unhealthy things.) Often parents are quick to try to “fix” the problem. We go to the child and either try to discipline the child or calm him, but in doing so we give the child **a lot of attention**. Kids like this attention! Better is to give *no attention to the anger* but A LOT of attention to a well-behaved child. As soon as the anger is done and the child makes one good choice, pour on a lot of praise. *What gets notices is what gets repeated.*

5. Don’t lecture, discipline, or try to fix things in an angry moment. When a child is angry, he is unable to think rationally. *Emotional arousal makes it impossible to listen to what the other person is saying.* A parent’s words are literally “going in one ear and out the other.” If you have advice or want to create a “teaching moment,” save it. **Your**

words will not be heard. Save the consequences for when your child calms down and don't believe that your "fixes" will help anything. The best thing to say is, "I love you. I know you're angry, and I'll be here for you. We will talk about this when you calm down." This will help both you and your child.

6. Realize that sometimes anger is about minor things, rather than big ones. Sometimes my kids are angry because they are hungry or tired. Sometimes they're disappointed in something completely different, and it comes out the wrong way. Giving a child a snack or giving him time to rest and think is sometimes the best fix.

7. Prayer works. Tools to help calm kids is important, but prayer should top your list. When dealing with angry kids I've sent urgent text messages to friends, asking them to pray. I've also plopped down right in the middle of a room and started praying quietly to myself. While there are many ways to deal with emotional or physical problems, prayer battles the spiritual ones. Prayer pleads with Jesus to join us, help us, and calm us. **Prayer works—I've seen it work with both me and my child!**

All these methods have helped our family, and I'm happy to say that the anger we see these days is much less intense and much more spread out. There is no chance of eliminating anger completely from any home, but these tools will help ensure this unwelcome friend visits less often and stays a lot less time when he does!

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