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Helping Your Child Age Six and Older Manage Anger - Part One

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If a parent or step-parent behaves angrily or very autocratically and doesn't allow a child to express himself, the child will learn to submerge his anger and resentment. When these emotions become suppressed, children may experience such symptoms as depression, withdrawal, eating disorders, cutting, substance abuse, and underachieving.

Unfortunately, some parents hit or spank a child - or worse. For a child, being physically assaulted by a parent (and yes, even a mild swat on the rear can feel like an assault to a child) can produce hurt, shame, anger, and even rage. Rarely does a spanking or other physical act cause a child to reflect upon his own actions or words; instead, he develops negative feelings towards either the perpetrator or himself, or both. If you want a meaningful and respectful form of punishment, you will need to take time to develop a plan for your child with consequences and restrictions. This plan ideally would be combined with incentives and positive reinforcement.

One of the angriest young adults I have worked with had an extremely angry father. Matt, age 20, came in for therapy because his anger was disrupting his relationship with his girlfriend of two years. She insisted that he work on curbing his rage or else she was going to move on. Matt acknowledged that his anger was getting more frequent and intense, and that he was worried about being so out-of-control.

Matt was a college junior who frequently got into verbal altercations while drinking at parties in his college town. He was easily provoked and very confrontational. Alcohol fueled Matt's rage, but he was also angry when he wasn't drinking. Matt drove aggressively - cutting off other drivers and cursing at them if they were going too slowly. He also competed with other drivers on the road to see if he could go faster and get ahead of them. In addition, Matt was very possessive of his girlfriend and got angry if she noticed or talked to other males.

When Matt was growing up, his father constantly yelled at and demeaned Matt's mother and Matt and his brothers. At times Matt's father was fun and even-tempered, but more often he was negative and critical. While his father didn't use physical force, Matt and his brothers were often punished in arbitrary and unpredictable ways. Matt had few opportunities to express his feelings, so his anger festered for many years.

Matt first needed supportive therapy to give voice to the pent-up hurt and anger he experienced as a child. He had buried other feelings as well: resentment toward his mother that she was so weak and unable to protect him; guilt about not protecting his younger siblings and also about disliking his own father; and an overlay of self-loathing because he thought that on some level he must have deserved to be treated poorly.

Matt eventually worked his way out of the anger that trapped him. In the next column, we will look at specific techniques that helped Matt and can help your child as well.

People express anger all around us. All we need to do is listen to political commentary, drive in rush hour traffic, or work in a customer service job to see or hear expressions of anger. Anger is a normal human emotion, and handling it effectively is crucial to developing into a stable and happy person. But unfortunately, open, vehement, and sometimes hostile expressions of anger have become a familiar part of our culture. We need to teach our children how to deal with anger within the family so they will have smoother family relationships and be able to apply these skills outside the home.

In order to help your child manage anger it is first important to consider how you handle anger, and what sort of example you set. If you are easily triggered and react impulsively and heatedly, you are teaching your child to let any annoying thing bother him. He won't learn to differentiate minor matters from significant ones. You are showing him that it is normal and natural to behave aggressively when angered. Is this the message you want to convey? If not, it is important to work on your own level of anger and how it's expressed.

Determine if there is anything in your family dynamics that may contribute to your child's anger. When I work with an adult or child who has anger management issues, there is often someone in the family who either provokes anger in others or acts out in anger - or both. For example, when children grow up in a home where there is a lot of tension and conflict between parents, they are exposed to situations where anger is a prevailing emotion. Anger becomes the normal means of communication and expression.

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