

# Teaching Your Adolescent About Anger

In the curriculum of family life, parents should include the topic of anger.

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The question essentially was: “What can I teach my teenager about anger, now that he seems angry more of the time?” It’s a complicated issue.

What follows are a few rambling thoughts that you might want to include in your “home schooling” about anger. Start with explaining the function of anger, parental history with anger, why adolescents can have additional cause for anger, how anger can be entrapping, characteristics that can foster anger, and a variety of ways for calming anger.

THE FUNCTION OF ANGER. Like all emotions, anger is functional, part of the affective awareness system that allows us to identify when something significant is happening in our internal or external world of experience, something that feels like it deserves our attention. Just as grief registers loss and frustration reacts to blockage, for example, anger patrols our wellbeing for violations: “That feels wrong!” “That shouldn’t have happened!” “That hurts!” “That’s not fair!” “This is not what I expected!” “I feel mistreated!” “This is not what I deserve!”

In like words, so speaks the teenager to her serious boyfriend after his recent lies. Then she uses the energy her anger generates to make an expressive response (“You’ve treated me really badly”), a protective response (“Don’t ever do that to me again!”), and a corrective response (“If you lie any more, I will rethink our relationship.”) With each statement she is using anger to help take care of herself. “Now we need to talk!” Being told about how she handled this, her parents were not surprised. “Of the three kids, she’s always been the one to bring us to the table when in her eyes we’ve acted out of line, so there’s no reason to think she wouldn’t hold a boyfriend to similar account.”

It’s important for parents to understand that although having an adolescent who gets intensely angry with them from time to time may seem like a problem; it can be less of a problem than having a teenager who is unable to experience or express anger. For example, cut off from the aid of anger, an insecure teenager may allow himself to be exploited by a dominant or coercive friend. Unable to feel angry, express anger, or harness anger in response to mistreatment, he can lack the emotional capacity to feel offended, to actively identify something wrong and to object. So once again, he has allowed his popular and persuasive friend to borrow money on promise of repayment, although the friend has never repaid before.

Thus the parental injunction should not be, “Anger is bad,” or “Don’t get angry,” but “Respect anger” and “Learn to use anger appropriately by valuing the healthy vigilance that anger has to offer.”

PARENTAL HISTORY WITH ANGER. For some parents, their adolescent’s anger occurs in an unhappy context of which the teenager is usually ignorant – the history of family anger in which the adults grew up. This can be problematic if they were uncomfortable or felt unsafe around a parent’s or a sibling’s harmful anger. From this training and association, anger from their teenager can carry a measure of remembered threat. If you learned to tip toe around a parent’s unpredictable outbursts of temper, for example, you may be tempted to avoid your angry teenager or even give way to appease it. In the process, the young person’s anger may be given bullying influence that you increasingly fear, creating a relationship that is not healthy for anyone. So, don’t give your teenager’s anger emotionally extortionate power. And don’t identify with and imitate your explosive parent or sibling, and use anger to get your way. Best to do, at a quiet time, is explain how anger functioned in the family you grew up in, and how you wish it to be managed differently by everyone in this family now.

ANGER AND ADOLESCENCE. The process of adolescence itself can be an angering one because it is filled with frustrations. For example, you’re supposed to act as directed when increasingly you don’t like being told what to do. You want more freedom for independence, but you must still live on parental terms. You’re asked to act more grown up, but are frequently reminded that you are still only a child. Parents hold you back when you want to grow full speed ahead. They make demands when you have better things to do. They want to talk when you have nothing you want to say. Come adolescence, a major source of frustration and target of anger in the lives of many teenagers are their parents: “They’re always in my business, against what’s fun, demanding work, on my case, or acting unfair! Parents can be a pain!” So: accept that adolescence is a more angry age and that most of that anger will be directed at parents as the primary ruling powers that be.

HOW ANGER CAN BE ENTRAPPING. Anger can be an entrapping experience because in the heat of the moment it can obscure loving feelings causing unloving words or actions to occur. Since intense anger always carries this potential for inflicting verbal or physical harm, propose and ratify a communication compact with your adolescent when it comes to anger. “Getting angry with each other is not a problem; it is to be expected. But how we express our anger can be a problem if we use it as an excuse to do the other person hurt. Therefore, whenever either one of us feels really angry at the other, before we pop off and say or do something that either of us might regret, let’s both agree to take a time out, cool down, and then talk further about our disagreement when we can choose our words thoughtfully, and not emotionally.”

When such a compact is not in place and observed, two kinds of damage can be done in very quick succession – insult and retaliation. “Thinking” with anger can lead to thoughtless words or actions, and then provoke similar anger in response. Yells the tired mom at the teenager who was asked to assist at the evening meal but has broken a dish, spilled food, and made a sudden mess: “What’s the matter with you, can’t you ever do anything right!” And now hurtful words from the parent beget adolescent anger in return: “Well that’s the last time I ever agree to help you!” Anger begetting anger rarely serves parent and adolescent well because the interaction just becomes more injured and inflamed. Cooler heads need to prevail, and parents need to lead the way. **What a parent models matters.**

CHARACTERISTICS THAT CAN FOSTER ANGER. Important instruction for parents to give their teenager is explaining how anger is often connected to common psychological characteristics, and second is how susceptibility to anger can be reduced when these characteristics are changed. **They might explain how people who are anger prone often have one or more of the following ways of operating in place.**

--They are highly judgmental and need to be right.

--They feel strongly entitled and expect to get their way.

--They take events personally that are not personally meant.

--They use fresh offenses to revive memories of old grievances.

--They attack what’s wrong with anger by blaming others when problems arise.

Adult and adolescent can be quick to anger on all these counts, but they can also change their readiness to feel violated or wronged if they so choose. For example, consider the teenager who learns a lot about managing anger from seeing her dad’s bad temper subside as, with practice and some counseling help, the man becomes a different parent (more “mellow”, his daughter called it) to live with, both for the family and himself. How?

--Moderating his need to evaluate, he becomes more tolerant and less critical to live with. “I don’t have to be the judge all the time.”

--Moderating his need to have everything go his way and be done the “right” way, he becomes less controlling to live with. “I don’t always have to know what’s best for everyone.”

--Moderating his tendency to treat frustrations with others as deliberate provocations, he stops treating them as deliberately intended, and becomes less over-reactive to live with. "Other people's actions are done more for them than they are out to get me."

--Moderating his practice of piling past grievances onto present injuries and intensifying these offenses, with less cause for anger he becomes calmer to live with. "I've learned to let a lot of old stuff go."

--Moderating his readiness to blame, vilifying others and victimizing himself, he takes his share of responsibility and becomes less accusatory to live with. "Now I try to find solutions instead of finding fault."

CALMING ANGER. Anger is most often a matter of mental choice, not only whether to get angry but in how to express it. Expression is complicated because anger when at all intense must often be calmed before reason can govern what is said and done. "I don't know what calming approach works for you," explained a mom to her volatile daughter after the teenager's frustrated outburst, "but this is what I do for me. It sounds silly, but it usually works. I silently sing to myself, '**Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream!**' I just keep repeating this interlude in my head until I change the mood that's managing my mind. Then I'm ready to think about what makes good sense to do. For you, just focus on anything positive that can interrupt your anger long enough for better judgment to take hold." So: have a self-calming plan in place for whenever anger feels intense.

Explain to your teenager that anger is the power emotion, often used as an aggressive cover to conceal more sensitive feelings that are more vulnerable and feel more risky to express – frustration, sadness, hurt, failure, humiliation, shame, rejection, distrust, jealousy, inadequacy, insecurity, fear, surprise, for example. So, after having identified the violation and declared your anger at your adolescent for breaking his word, ask yourself what other feelings are going on, and take the time to talk about those. Instruct by example. "I was angry that you didn't keep your word, but I was also feeling really disappointed because you forgot your promise to me."

So: since anger rarely tells the full emotional story when a significant violation occurs, take the time (and the risk) to talk about what else is emotionally going on so your teenager can be encouraged to do the same. Bring the other emotions to the discussion table and anger assumes a less prominent place.

**Re-framing anger** can also help. Because people don't get angry at what they don't care about, all anger is a statement of caring. So: if you can shift the focus of what you want to say from what you are mad at to what

matters to you about whatever happened or didn't happen, receptive communication can be encouraged, and provoking a defensive response can be avoided. For example, instead of attacking a violation with angry accusation and criticism, "You never do what you say, you're always breaking your word," try to express what you really care about, what matters to you. Try saying something like this: "It means a lot to me for you to remember your promises because that shows how keeping your word to me is really important to you. Can we talk about that?"

And when your adolescent gets really angry with you, tame it by shifting the focus of your concern to whatever issue of caring is at stake. "You wouldn't be so angry with me unless something that really matters to you is going on and going wrong. Please tell me what it is so I can try to understand."

For everyone, learning to manage their anger and not letting anger manage them, takes constant work. During adolescence, a lot of good practice can be done. And there can be rewards at the end of the day: "This time I didn't lose my temper when my teenager challenged my decision. I just heard her out and then repeated how my mind was still made up. And because I gave her a full and fair hearing, she finally did what I asked without losing her temper with me."

Finally, for the teenager or parent who holds onto to the bad in their experience, they might also want to practice holding onto the good because one of the **best antidotes to anger is gratitude, counting your blessings instead of your grievances**. Then, of course, there is that old caution from Alcoholics Anonymous about how stored up anger can endanger one's emotional sobriety: "Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

**Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist in Austin, Texas. His most recent books are: *The Connected Father*, *The Future of Your Only Child*, and *Stop Screaming*.