

Anger and Aggression: Helping Handout for Home

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INTRODUCTION

Emotional outbursts and aggressive behavior are fairly common in young children. These behaviors typically decrease as children approach school age and develop better verbal and self-regulatory skills. When a child's angry outbursts and aggressive behavior occur more frequently than among other children, it is important that these difficulties be addressed early. If not, they tend to persist and increase the child's risk for a variety of later negative outcomes, including delinquency, academic difficulties, substance use, conduct problems, and poor adjustment. Verbal and physical aggression are often the first signs of some childhood psychiatric disorders, including oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD). Both of these disorders occur in up to 10% of the general population (higher among males), making it all the more important to recognize and treat aggressive behaviors early. Early onset (before age 10) of symptoms of ODD and CD increases the risk that an antisocial behavior pattern may continue into adulthood. Thus, early treatment and prevention, before a formal disorder is diagnosed, are critically important.

This handout is to help parents of children and adolescents who often are angry and aggressive. However, most parents may find many of the recommendations helpful.

Characteristics of childhood anger and aggression can vary from problems controlling emotions and mood to severe assaultive and manipulative behaviors. Types of anger and aggression are exhibited in varying degrees and can include behaviors such as the following:

- Arguing and yelling
- Bullying—including verbal and physical, such as calling names or pushing, and cyberbullying,

or using e-mail, social media, or the Internet to intimidate others

- Threatening verbally or physically
- Starting rumors
- Excluding others
- Striking back in anger
- Using force to get something they want
- Physically fighting

Notably, aggressive behaviors do not always involve physical contact with others. Verbal aggression in the elementary school years may include starting rumors, excluding others, and arguing. Children's aggression can involve deliberate efforts to bully, intimidate, and gain social dominance over others, or it can be intense episodes of physiological arousal and failure to regulate emotions. Such emotional arousal often occurs immediately after the child perceives a threat. Emotionally charged aggression often occurs in children who are highly irritable and easily angered, and can be accompanied by, or lead to, the child experiencing anxiety and depression. Whether aggression is deliberate or results from poor emotional regulation, interventions should be designed appropriately. Interventions for children who primarily display deliberate aggression should focus on teaching them about the consequences of their behavior, whereas interventions for children whose aggression arises from poor emotional regulation should focus instead on helping them gain greater control of their emotions.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Various factors contribute to the development of anger and aggression problems in children. Children who engage in deviant behavior in childhood, rather than

in adolescence, are more likely to display the most persistent, severe, and violent antisocial behavior over time. Indeed, childhood aggression is often viewed as an indication of a broader pattern of problems, frequently involving rule breaking and defiance toward adults (known as oppositional and defiant behaviors and covert rule-breaking behaviors) that could lead to more serious violations in adolescence.

Early Signs of Anger and Aggression Problems

The first signs of children's problems with anger and aggression may start very early, such as in infants with irritable, difficult-to-soothe temperaments. Early behavioral problems in toddlers and preschoolers, such as impulsivity, hyperactivity, and temper tantrums, may eventually develop into more serious disruptive and aggressive behaviors, such as arguing with adults, defying rules, bullying others, and starting fights. Since almost all young children have some temper tantrums at this age, the focus of this handout is on children who have temper tantrums of unusually high intensity, frequency, and severity, and who have great difficulty regulating their emotions, or calming down.

Difficulties in Parent–Child Relationships

Children with difficult temperaments and early emerging behavioral problems often fail to develop positive attachments with their parents or significant caregivers. As a result, they may become involved in increasingly hostile and coercive exchanges with their parents and other significant adults, including teachers. Parents of children with disruptive behavior problems often display high rates of harsh and inconsistent discipline and show low rates of positive involvement. In some cases, this response occurs because the child's difficult behavior makes it difficult for parents to provide warm and nurturing responses. In this context, the parents' normal ways of parenting, which may be very useful with a sibling, may not be sufficient to meet the demands of a child with impulsive behavior and poor emotional regulation. Parents of such children will learn that they need to set very clear rules and expectations and have flexible discipline strategies and problem-solving skills. Highly punishing parenting behaviors can make matters worse, increasing the coercive exchanges between parents and their aggressive children.

Social Difficulties

As children experience more coercive interactions with parents, they may begin to use similar behaviors

in other social interactions, leading to increasingly aggressive and disruptive behavior with peers and adults. After repeated coercive interactions, children may begin to have problems processing social information or getting along with others. Such problems include relying on aggressive solutions when presented with social conflicts, such as hitting or kicking to get a toy from another child; expecting that aggressive solutions will work because physical intimidation has worked in the past; and having trouble interpreting social information accurately, such as seeing the harmless actions of others as intentionally hostile. Such social misperceptions have been documented as early as preschool.

Environmental Factors

The environment in which a child develops plays an important role in shaping the child's behavior. A number of environmental factors have been shown to increase children's risk of aggressive behavior. Children who are exposed to violence, either in their homes or in their neighborhoods, are at increased risk of exhibiting aggressive behavior themselves. Family stressors, such as lack of or loss of financial resources, a parent's substance use or mental health problems, high parental stress, and low parental social support, put young children at increased risk. Parents who are themselves depressed because of the stressors in their lives tend to become more inconsistent in their discipline efforts and less supportive of their children, leading to increasing rates of oppositional (defiant) and aggressive behaviors. Poor or unavailable parental supervision of children's activities also increases the risk of a child's aggressive behavior. A child who lives in a neighborhood with a high crime rate and low social cohesion will likely have fewer opportunities to connect in safe and positive ways with peers. These environmental characteristics often occur together, and children with multiple environmental risk factors tend to be at greatest risk. Such risk factors can affect the quality and nature of the parent's and child's relationship and the development of children's effective coping and social problem-solving skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preventing and Reducing Child Anger and Aggression Problems

Many children with anger and aggression problems will respond favorably to positive parenting techniques. Parents can help prevent and reduce

anger and aggression problems using the following recommendations.

1. **Set up regular opportunities for parent and child “special time.”** Ideally, this would be at least 10–15 minutes each day in which you connect positively with your child and avoid arguments, criticism, or sensitive topics. Connecting in this way regularly can strengthen the bond between you and your child and reduce arguments.
2. **Praise or reward your child for exhibiting positive behavior.** Make an effort to notice when your child displays the positive opposite of a problem behavior and offer praise or a reward for this. For example, you can praise your child for playing cooperatively with a sibling rather than fighting, for following an instruction without talking back, or for staying calm when something does not go his or her way. See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home*, for specific recommendations for the best use of praise and rewards.
3. **Develop and reinforce age-appropriate limits and consequences for your child.** Children behave better when they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and when limits are enforced calmly and consistently. Establish family rules, such as “We solve problems using words and kind voices.” Then, if your child yells or hits, take away access to video games for the rest of the night and explain that it is for breaking this rule.
4. **Work with other adults who spend time with your child.** Communicate closely with all of the adults who spend time with your child, such as your spouse, teachers, and coaches, to ensure that you are consistent in how you are reinforcing your child’s positive behavior (e.g., solving problems calmly) and providing consequences for problem behavior (e.g., yelling, hitting, or refusing to follow directions).
5. **Let your child see you resolve problems with others in a calm, respectful way.** Talk with your child about the techniques you use, sharing how you know when you are beginning to feel angry, what you do to calm yourself down, how you try to see situations from others’ perspectives, and how you try to resolve problems calmly and respectfully.
6. **When you see your child becoming angry, provide coaching.** Coach your child on how to notice when his or her body is starting to feel angry and on how to calm down. For example, say “I notice your

voice getting louder and I can see that it is difficult for you and your sister to share the computer. Let’s figure out a way for you each to have a turn.”

7. **Limit your child’s exposure to anger and aggression.** Limit your child’s exposure to peers who encourage teasing or fighting. Also, limit your child’s access to video games, television shows, or movies that model and reinforce violent behavior.
8. **Manage the stress of parenting to better model calm problem-solving for your child.** It is easier to handle difficult situations calmly when we feel less stressed ourselves. Care for yourself by limiting extra commitments and regularly taking time for yourself to relax and rejuvenate.
9. **Teach your child skills for effectively expressing his or her needs.** Children are less likely to use aggression or defiance as a means of getting what they want if they are able to discuss their needs with peers, parents, and teachers in a direct, respectful manner. For example, teach your child to make polite requests (e.g., suggest asking: “Can you please help stop my little brother from going in my room and taking my things?”) and be responsive to reasonable requests.

Responding When a Child Has Anger and Aggression Problems

Children who develop problems with anger and aggression will need extra support from their parents and caregivers so that they can learn more effective strategies for expressing their feelings and getting their needs met. Mental health professionals can work with parents and children to provide personalized intervention and support. Parents are also advised to work with their child’s teachers and school professionals, such as school psychologists, to ensure that the child’s behavior is addressed consistently at home and at school. Parents can ask if their child needs special resources or services, such as counseling or anger management training, or special arrangements and accommodations in the classroom.

The following strategies will give parents and caregivers ideas to help their child develop self-control and learn how to deal with anger and aggression. These examples are commonly found in prevention and intervention programs and have been shown to be effective.

10. **When your child shows anger and aggression, remain calm and model positive problem-solving.** If you feel yourself becoming angry in response

to your child's anger, take a moment to calm yourself by practicing deep breathing or using coping self-statements before responding to your child. If you need more time and can step away from the situation, let your child know that you need to take a break. Be sure to state this in terms of your feelings and let your child know that you will return shortly (e.g., "I am starting to feel upset and I'll be able to work with you better in a few minutes when I am more calm"), so your child does not feel abandoned or blamed.

11. **Ignore minor disruptive behaviors such as whining and complaining.** Ignoring minor problem behaviors can be an effective way to decrease unwanted behaviors and reduce arguments with your child. However, do not ignore unsafe behavior. Provide attention and praise when your child stops the negative behavior. Also, do not be surprised if the problem behaviors initially increase before they get better. Children can be very persistent! It will be important to be consistent until a reduction occurs.
12. **Respond quickly with consequences when your child breaks a rule or exhibits unsafe behavior.** When your child does not follow instructions, breaks rules, or engages in aggressive behavior, provide an immediate, logical consequence in a calm but firm voice. Responses can include implementing a time-out, assigning extra work or chores, or revoking a privilege.
13. **When your child is angry or aggressive, do not try to rationalize or argue with your child.** Getting into a discussion about the aggressive behavior or explaining why you are imposing a consequence encourages a power struggle. Inform your child that you will discuss the situation later, when he or she is calm and can be receptive to talking about how to avoid similar problems in the future.
14. **Help your child stop and think of effective ways to solve the problem.** First, help your child describe what the problem is. Then discuss alternative responses (both positive and negative). Evaluate these alternatives and coach your child in selecting and enacting the best response. This will help your child practice real-life problem solving with adult guidance.
15. **Remind your child to use relaxation techniques to calm down.** These might consist of counting to 10, taking deep breaths, or using soothing self-talk

(such as about making better choices when one feels less angry).

16. **Help your child develop a list of coping statements to deal with anger.** Practice these statements at calmer times so your child will be able to use the statements when provoked by others. Help your child memorize a few favorite coping statements, such as "Don't be a fool, keep your cool," "Grow up, don't blow up," or "Practice the golden rule." Then, when your child appears angry, coach him or her on using one of these coping statements or a coping statement specific to the situation, such as "It hurts to lose a game, but it won't help to take out my anger on my family and friends.").
17. **Help your child recognize the feelings, behaviors, and thoughts that accompany anger.** Physical signals of anger may include a racing heartbeat, faster breathing, and tense muscles. Behaviors may include slamming doors, stomping, and yelling. When your child notices those responses, you can also talk about the accompanying thoughts (such as "It isn't fair," or "Why am I always the one that gets blamed?") and about steps to manage anger when these signals appear. Anger management strategies that can be used include walking away, taking deep breaths, or saying coping statements.
18. **Help your child think about what others may be thinking and feeling.** If you are talking to your child about an event that made her or him angry, practice taking another person's perspective. For example, if your son thinks it isn't fair that he is being asked to take out the trash, help him see the situation from his sister's perspective (i.e., she unpacked the groceries and helped cook dinner before he got home). Or help your daughter consider how it makes others in the family feel when she complains about having to clean up the dinner dishes after she ate a nice meal that others worked hard to prepare.
19. **Praise, encourage, and reinforce your child's use of the anger management strategies he or she is learning.** Even when such use is not perfect, supporting the effort is important. Developing the ability to control strong feelings takes a long time and requires motivation, encouragement, continuing guidance, and support.
20. **Set up a behavioral contract with your child.** The contract should list positive behaviors that you expect and name a reward that your child can receive for meeting a certain number of these

behaviors. For example, if your child often argues, your target behavior is your child discussing something calmly. Rewards can be naturally occurring, such as getting more computer time, playing a game with a parent, or getting to watch a favorite television program.

21. ***Don't hesitate to seek help if you are very concerned about ongoing inappropriate behavior.*** Your physician or a teacher can help arrange a comprehensive evaluation by a qualified mental health professional to determine if more intensive treatment, such as individual or family therapy, is needed.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

www.aacap.org

The website of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry provides a thorough overview of current knowledge regarding the causes, symptoms, and treatment of oppositional defiant disorder (https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/resource_centers/odd/odd_resource_center_odd_guide.pdf).

<https://www.livesinthebalance.org/parents-families>

The website for Lives in the Balance provides resources for parents and families related to its Collaborative and Proactive Solutions model for handling children with challenging behavior, as well as links to related parenting resources.

<http://yaleparentingcenter.yale.edu/>

This website for the Yale Parenting Center provides resources related to the Kazdin Method for parenting children with oppositional defiant behavior, as well as links to related parenting resources.

Books

Barkley, R. A., & Benton, C. M. (2013). *Your defiant child: Eight steps to better behavior* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book provides practical, research-based advice for parenting a child with oppositional, defiant, and aggressive behavior.

Greene, R. W. (2014). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This book helps parents of children with emotional and behavior difficulties understand why and when their child displays challenging behaviors and how to respond in ways that are nonpunitive, nonadversarial, humane, and effective.

Kazdin, A. E. (2008). *The Kazdin method for parenting the defiant child*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

This book gives parents specific strategies from a parenting program for children with oppositional defiant and aggressive behavior. The program has been proven effective in research studies.

Related Helping Handouts for Home

ADHD: Helping Handout for Home

Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Helping Handout for Home

Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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