

# Helping Your Child Cope with Anger and Anxiety



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One of the most important things you can teach your child is how to cope with anger and anxiety—normal feelings that get a bad press but are part of the human condition. You want your child to take stock of her emotions continuously and to express them appropriately. Managing and taking care of feelings (affect regulation) is a key life skill.

The first thing to do is acknowledge the emotion. Say, "You look like you're feeling angry [or worried or anxious] right now. Would you like to talk about it?" If your child says no or does not respond, don't insist—and be prepared to wait until he is ready.

You can also ask, "What would make you feel better right now?" and offer a backrub or a hug. If the offer isn't accepted, say, "I'll wait for you to let me know how I can help." Some people like to withdraw and be alone when they are upset.

When anger is the issue, your child can test various ways of honoring the feelings and discharging the associated energy and tension from the body. You can suggest a number of possibilities:

- Tell people when you're angry with them. It's important to own the feeling and communicate it without insult, injury, or destruction of property.
- If you can't tell the person concerned, try writing a letter. You can write as many drafts as you like, and you can mail one of them or not. It may also feel good to ball up each draft and hurl it into a wastebasket.
- Vent by telling a trusted friend or relative how you are feeling. Or write in a journal.

- What does anger look like? Create art that shows how you feel. You can paint, draw, sculpt, or build.
- Use the energy behind your anger to clean a room, sort through odds and ends, pull weeds, rake leaves, or shovel snow. One young woman told me that angry children growing up in her family used to go out on the back porch and whack garbage cans with a baseball bat.
- Go for a walk, a run, or a bike ride. You can also jump rope, shoot hoops, or even bounce on a trampoline.

Challenge your child to acknowledge her anger and to produce new and creative ways of using its energy.

When anxiety interferes with daily life, start by asking your child how he has coped with panic, fear, or nervousness in the past. As with anger, you want him to develop the habit of noticing his feelings and learning how to take care of them.

Sometimes constructive strategies will emerge when you analyze something your child has said or done spontaneously. Then you can highlight the success and congratulate her on it. A few possibilities:

- Try positive self-talk. Your child can talk herself out of the worry with phrases like "I can do this," "Piece of cake," "This will be over in a flash," "No problemo," and so forth.
- Breathe deeply to release tension in the body. Have your child lie flat on his back with a book on his stomach. Tell him to breathe so that the book rises and falls. Once he's got the hang of it, he can use deep breathing from a standing or sitting position. With a smaller child, try producing a colorful balloon and asking him to blow it up.
- If your child worries obsessively, have her remember a wonderful moment from the past. Then whenever the anxious thoughts start to take over, she can close her eyes and think about the pleasant memory instead.
- If a task or activity seems overwhelming or intimidating, help your child to break it down into manageable chunks. Don't let him forget to congratulate herself after each step taken.
- Experiment with cuddly animals, squishy toys, soft music, jigsaw puzzles, card games like solitaire, and blowing bubbles. Do any of these feel soothing to jangly nerves?
- Older children may enjoy trying aromatherapy, relaxation tapes, nature walks, candles, or strobe lights to calm themselves. For a soothing sensory treat, try making homemade hand-cranked ice cream or bread that you knead by hand (no machines allowed!).

The trick in discharging difficult emotions is to involve the whole body in activity so that the brain isn't alone in bearing the burden. We all need to understand how we respond to our environment and how we can find peace of mind. Teach your

child by your example that rewarding yourself for work well done is part of good self-care, whether the task in question is a creative achievement or just slogging through one of life's tough spots.

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