

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## Helping Children Handle Anger

Everybody gets angry. You do, and so does your child. But figuring out what to do with that anger is tough.

What do you do with an angry child? Letting your anger or your child's anger get out of hand is dangerous. But so is hiding it. Hidden anger only smolders until it explodes later "for no good reason."

### Why Face Anger Directly

There is a big payoff in helping your child learn how to handle feelings--not just pleasant ones such as joy and delight, but tough ones such as anger and frustration, too. Children who understand their own emotions are more effective on all fronts. They are more open to people and experiences, more healthy both physically and mentally.

Anger is a natural and valuable part of a child's emotional repertoire. It's a protective response to perceived encroachment, threats to well-being, to bodily or psychological harm. To feel anger is a natural part of being alive.

Approach dealing with a child's anger in two parts.

1. Help the child put words to the feelings.
2. Define non-destructive ways to let off steam.

### Put the Angry Feelings Into Words

A toddler's first response to frustration and anger will often be to strike out at the cause of

frustration. Your job as a parent is to teach the child to use words in the place of fists. This must be taught, both by your own example, and by instructing the child:

"Tell your brother how you feel when he takes your toy."

"If you don't like it, tell them so."

Try to get your own emotions under control before dealing with your child. Step back, take a deep breath, do whatever you can to keep from getting caught up in the child's anger. If you can't pull yourself back a bit emotionally you're likely to become angry yourself. When this happens, the child sees you as an enemy, not the friend you want to be. Remember a child's anger belongs to the child, even if you're the brunt of it.

So allowing your child the time to vent her feelings is the place to start. If your child is very young, at the temper tantrum stage, you can say that you'll sit and wait until she is finished.

If the child is older, let him say whatever it is he needs to say. Keep in mind that what you're hearing is the child's perception of a situation. Your child has a right to a point of view and needs you to validate that right, even if you see the situation quite differently.

Keep your focus on the child's feelings and try to understand them. Avoid the temptation to fix the situation or make it better. Children aren't interested in advice or consolation or constructive criticism. What they are looking for is UNDERSTANDING.

You can show a child that you are on her side by reflective listening, that is putting words on her feelings. You might say,

"Wow, you're really mad!" or  
"Sounds like you're really hurting." or  
"Boy, you're angry!" or  
"That must have been frustrating."

Notice that no judgment is made in statements like these. Just descriptive words are used.

If you can see your child is angry but hasn't said anything, ask what's going on. If your child says, "Nothing." then reflect that back too. You might say, "I can see that something is bothering you but maybe you don't want to talk about it right now." Often accepting a child's refusal to talk is just the ticket to getting him to say what's on his mind.

Encourage your child to put feelings into words, even words you find difficult to hear, and then show that you have heard what the child said, is the crucial first step.

### **Help Your Child Channel the Anger**

Next comes dealing with the physical side of things. When your child becomes angry over a disappointment or a perceived injustice, expressing those feelings carries with it the need to discharge energy, to let off steam. The word "emotion" can be thought of as "e-motion"--energy that moves through us, that moves us to act to restore a sense of well-being. Just as children jump with joy, they also explode with anger.

You can help your child channel this energy in non-destructive ways. You can help your child know the limitations of physical behavior.

Never accept any destructive acting out of angry feelings. It is all right for a child to say they want to hit you or their baby brother, as long as they don't actually do it.

Set the rules, then offer acceptable options. "I know you're really mad, but you can't hit your brother, you can't hit me, and you can't throw things." But it's OK to stamp your feet, punch the couch pillows, smash the play dough, spit in the sink, throw the ball outside, or go to your room and scream."

### **Other Tips**

Try humor. Sometimes kidding a child out of an outburst, without teasing or making fun of the child, let's both of you "save face."

Try closeness and touching. No matter how old your child, sometimes all that is needed to calm her down is a sudden hug or other impulsive show of affection.

When your child expresses his anger with words, not fists, and/or uses acceptable options for acting out anger, offer your praise.

### **Follow-Up**

Once you've helped your child put her feelings into words and given her time to let off steam, then, and only then, is she ready to deal constructively with whatever caused the angry feelings in the first place. At this point most children are able to go ahead and solve whatever the underlying problem was themselves.

Showing children that it's OK to express strong feelings seems awkward at first. As adults, we try to fix things up, manage it, make it better, and deny the feelings--because that's what we learned as children. But our goal is to go one better for our children. Anger is a part of life. We can help our children learn from it.

*Sources:*

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