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Dealing with Children's Anger

"I hate Patrick! He'll never be my friend again!"

"No! No! No! I want my M&M's now, Stupidhead!"

Children's angry feelings, children's angry words, and children's angry actions can be a frequent and upsetting occurrence in families with young children. Although it's not easy, parents can deal effectively with intense confrontations by accepting angry feelings, limiting inappropriate angry behavior, and practicing socially appropriate angry behavior during "family rehearsals."

Accept angry feelings.

Differentiating between angry feelings and angry actions is important.

Angry feelings can be part of any relationship. An important message for children to hear is: "It's okay to be angry....It's not bad to be mad....People sometimes get angry at their friends and family...Anger happens."

Sometimes children's angry feelings can make parents uncomfortable. Although hearing "Grandma makes me mad!" is difficult, it is important to listen to children's angry feelings rather than shutting them off. Responding, perhaps, with a simple concerned, "Oh," can give a child room to explore and pass through anger on the way to other feelings.

Limit inappropriate angry behavior.

Angry feelings are acceptable; inappropriate angry actions need limits. "I can understand that you're angry at your little brother, but chairs are not for kicking. We need to find another way for you to express your angry feelings," is a statement accepting of a child's feelings, but limiting a child's inappropriate behavior.

Practice appropriate angry behavior during "family rehearsals."

Often, temper tantrums and angry encounters with children are so intense and disturbing that families try to move on quickly to recover from the conflict. However, at a later, quieter time, parents need to revisit these conflicts and deal with inappropriate angry actions by helping a child practice more socially appropriate behavior.

A "family rehearsal" is a one or two minute practice in which a parent and child role play and practice a specific socially appropriate outlet for anger. Suppose a mother wants her child to say "No!" rather than hit when angry. During a "family rehearsal," Mom says, "I'm concerned about what happens when you get angry. Let's practice saying 'No' when I take this toy away from you...Let's hear a loud 'No!'...that's great...a little louder 'No!'...terrific...that's a great way to let someone know what you want...what a great 'No!' I like the way you are putting your feelings into words." Practicing in this

manner several times a day helps to establish a new way for a child to express anger and frustration.

A less verbal child may need to rehearse nonverbal outlets for angry feelings. During this “family rehearsal,” a child might practice stomping like an angry dinosaur or curling up like an angry hedgehog as in the book When Emily Woke Up Angry by Riana Duncan, or stirring up a bowl of “Mean Soup,” as in the book by that title by Betsy Everitt. “Family Rehearsals” provide important practice opportunities for children to establish new responses for angry feelings.

Angry situations can be difficult and frustrating for both parents and children. By accepting angry feelings, limiting inappropriate angry behavior, and using “family rehearsals” to practice socially acceptable outlets for anger, parents can help young children deal more positively and more appropriately with their angry feelings.

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