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Anger Management - You Make Me So Mad

Even loving parents blow their top. Here is how to express anger without saying things you'll later regret.

By Nancy Samalin, with Martha and Moraghan Jablow

"I never knew I had a temper until I had children. No one told me I could get so enraged at someone I love so much."

"My daughter was sick and refused to take her medicine. I became almost crazy I had to leave the room because I was afraid I was going to force it down her throat. "

"When she starts whining, I want to shake her until she shuts up."

"My mother was a yeller and a hitter, and I resolved I'd never do that with my own children. But that is the first thing I do when they defy me. "

To people who do not have children, these words may sound like a chorus of child abusers, but they are the words of loving, responsible parents. Until they have children, most adults never imagine the fury a child can inspire. And what makes our rage so frightening is that it is directed at the very people we care most about.

We rarely talk about how enraged children can make us. We may feel guilty because a child can send us into a temper tantrum as unharnessed as his own. We deeply regret the vengeful, abusive words we cannot take back. We feel that there is something wrong with us because we explode. But normal parents become enraged by normal children. Intense anger toward children is inevitable no matter how much we love them.

In the heat of a confrontation we often want to hurt our children, get back at them, humiliate them, punish them because they have made us feel so powerless. We need to try to resist that urge for revenge because our longterm goal is to change behavior, not to inflict pain. And after we do cause emotional or physical pain, instead of feeling relieved, most parents feel worse.

In my weekly workshops, parents bring in written dialogues that they have had with their children

since the previous meeting, and together we analyze these dialogues. By examining them, parents begin to listen to themselves. When they begin to hear how ineffective or hurtful their impulsive, automatic responses can be, parents learn to substitute more caring and effective means.

A Better Way

When children elicit our rage, what can we do to limit the damage our anger may cause them as well as us? What are our alternatives to hitting or hurling insults?

1. Use words that express your feelings instead of attacking the child. Make a brief, strong statement: "I am very angry about . . ." Depending on the circumstances, you may want to add a short statement about your expectations: "I expect this new coat to be hung up, not dumped on the floor." Say nothing about the child's character or personality ("You're such a slob"). You can say how you feel, not how "rotten" they are.
2. Exit - the best four-letter word for an angry confrontation. Removing yourself from the scene gives you time to cool down and think about what you'll say next.
3. Make amends when the storm has blown over. You can restore loving feelings and let your children know that your anger-no matter how intense-is not permanent.

Keep It Brief

Dad: "Tina, get in here now! Look at this pig sty. You're getting messier every day. Why can't you ever hang up your clothes? I refuse to buy you any more clothes if you're just going to throw them all around."

Tina: "Why don't you ever yell at Tommy? His room is messy, too. You're mean."

This father's anger was understandable-Tina's room was a mess. But his outburst did not encourage her to change. His verbal attack order, and threat only elicited Tina's defiance, making her as angry as he was. She never even heard the message he intended to give-that she should clean her room.

Our aim is to use the enormous energy of our anger less destructively. We need to begin our statements with "I" or "my" ("My blood boils when ...") rather than "you." An angry statement beginning with "you" will inevitably become a personal attack on the child's character. She will react with hurt, defiance, or resentment, and the attack will have accomplished nothing toward solving the problem.

Statements of anger are most effective when they are brief. A brief statement makes us more authoritative. The longer we talk, the more our children tune us out. Children listen to one firm sentence about our feelings ("I really get mad when I call you to dinner three times and I'm totally ignored") because they do care about how we feel.

Jon and his mother were shopping when he began begging for several kinds of sugar-coated cereals, which she refused to buy. As his pleas grew more adamant, she found herself becoming

angrier:

Jon: (loudly): "If you won't buy these, you're a stupid jerk."

Mom: "I get very angry when I'm called names."

Jon: "Well, you're a dirty dumbhead."

Mom: "I won't be called names. I don't even feel like listening when I'm talked to that way."

Jon: "Well, I don't want to talk to you ever again."

Mom: "I see how angry you are. Maybe you'll feel more like talking to me later."

She walked toward the checkout and Jon followed. Later in the car, Jon said, "Mommy, I'm sorry I called you names. Are you still mad at me?"

Jon's mother had been furious at being called dumb and stupid, but she responded with a brief statement of her feelings ("I get very angry when I'm called names") instead of counterattacking. When he called her a "dirty dumbhead," she was tempted to counter with, "You have such a fresh mouth. Don't you dare talk to me like that again!" But she stayed on the track of expressing her feelings briefly, and she even added another skill-she acknowledged his feelings by saying, "I see how angry you are." She also showed him that name-calling wouldn't get him what he wanted.

Their struggle was resolved because she expressed her anger without damaging Jon. His apology would never have come about if she hadn't briefly stated her anger and acknowledged his feelings. His question, "Are you still mad at me?" shows how much children need our good feelings.

Four-year-old Kyle frequently hit and kicked. His mother tried to help him translate his frustration into words. When he struck out, she held his wrists and said firmly, "No hitting. Tell me how you feel in words." Little by little, he began to substitute words for fists. His mother thought they were making progress until one afternoon when he didn't want to leave the playground. His unanticipated tantrum pushed her into a rage:

Kyle: (whining) "I don't want to go home. I want to stay here."

Mom: "We have to go now." (Kyle began to kick her.)

Mom: "No kicking. Tell me in words." Kyle (loudly): "Mommy is a baby. You're caca. You're a pee-pee doody. I hate you."

She exploded, dragged him home, and washed his mouth out with soap. Her fury was understandable. She was acutely embarrassed, but her way of striking back was invasive and humiliating. Even more importantly, Kyle learned he could not trust his mother.

She had told him to express his feelings in words, and when he did, she punished him.

In the heat of daily confrontations, children often lash back with "I hate you" or "You don't love me." When we are genuinely angry with them, we don't feel loving. If they say, "You don't love me," we often answer, "Oh, yes, I do." But they will still hear the anger in our voice. That is confusing to children. When our words and our tone of voice are contradictory, they get mixed messages and cannot trust their perception. They do not know whether to believe their instincts or our words.

A more authentic response to "You don't love me" would be, "Right now I'm feeling very cross, and I

don't feel like talking about love. I feel like talking about the toys that aren't put away . . . the hitting that needs to stop . . . the dog that has to be walked . . ." Later, when your anger has subsided, you can reassure your child that your loving feelings have returned.

Cooling-Off Time

When our wrath builds, exiting from the scene can put a physical stop to our outbursts before they become damaging, as the following shows:

Mom: "Linda, would you please feed the cats now?"

Linda: "I'm not your maid."

Mom: (raging inside) "I won't even discuss that statement."

Mom left the kitchen. When she had cooled off, she returned:

Mom: "I resent being spoken to in that manner. If you want to do a job other than feeding the cats, we can talk about it."

Linda: "What job?"

Mom: "I'll have to think about it."

Linda: "I think I will feed the cats. It makes them like me more."

It took great restraint for this mother not to respond in kind; but had she done so, nothing would have been accomplished.

Exiting gave her a chance to express her anger in ways that she would not later regret. Some parents go into the bathroom and cry or take a shower. Others turn up the radio and swear. Some pound pillows and others write angry notes. For Linda's mother, walking out of the kitchen bought her some time to cool off and to think of how she might offer Linda a choice that would pull them both out of this confrontation.

Five minutes before leaving for nursery school, Neil put on his superhero cape. As both Neil and his mother knew, Neil's teacher did not allow capes or other costumes:

Mom: "You know you can't wear that cape till after school."

Neil: "No, in school."

Mom: (impatiently) "Remember, your teacher said no superheroes in school."

Neil: "Then I won't go to school."

Mom: (furious) "Okay, don't!"

Neil:(brightly) "We can do something else."

Mom: (exploding) "If you don't go, you'll have to stay in your room all day. No TV. No going outside."

Mom left the kitchen for five minutes. When she was calmer, she came back:

Mom: "Let's erase what just happened. You really want to pretend you're a superhero, right?"

Neil: "Yes."

Mom: "I bet you feel strong and powerful when you play superhero."

Neil: "Yes."

Mom: "Are you ready to get your jacket on now?"

Neil: "Okay."

Neil put on his jacket, carried the superhero cape to school, and stashed it in his cubby.

Neil's mother exited from the superhero scene because she knew her anger was growing to a point where she was about to say or do something damaging to Neil. During her brief time away from him, she realized that she did not have to "control" him. Those few minutes alone let her see more clearly that the cape was in the teacher's domain, so she decided to let the teacher deal with it.

Time alone for a few moments allows us to become more rational, to think about a better solution, and to rehearse what we can say when we rejoin the child.

What does make us so angry with children? Usually it is a feeling of helplessness that stems from our inability to be "in control." Many parents have the illusion that they are supposed to control children. When children misbehave, we believe that it reflects on us. When we cannot control them, we are resentful that they embarrass us, defy us, ignore us, disappoint us.

Exiting is not possible if we are in public or if leaving the child would present any danger. But if our children misbehave in public and we begin to feel embarrassed as an audience of strangers stares at us, we can say to ourselves, "Thank goodness these people are strangers and I'll never see them again." It is more important to focus on the child's immediate need and ours than to appear as the "good parent."

Don't Take It Personally

Every Sunday morning, Suzi's father enjoyed cooking a big breakfast for the family:

Suzi: "I hate eggs. Why do we always have to have eggs?"

Dad: "Just eat your eggs, Suzi. You know you haven't had them in a week. We're out of cold cereal, and you don't like hot cereal."

Suzi picked at her eggs with disgust. Dad furiously grabbed her plate:

Dad: "Okay, go hungry. It's the last time I'll make breakfast for you."

Suzi: "I don't care."

Dad: "When I cook for you, all you do is give me aggravation."

He took Suzi's rejection personally and became furious because he could not make her enjoy the eggs. He thought to himself, "I went to the trouble of cooking for you, so eat and stop giving me a hard time." He issued a command: "Just eat your eggs." He offered an irrelevant explanation to induce her to eat the eggs: "We're out of cold cereal." "You don't like hot cereal" implied that something was wrong with her, as if all virtuous children liked hot cereal. His words, "Okay, go hungry," were rejecting and punitive. To maintain her pride, she retorted, "I don't care." Suzi's father

might have responded differently, but his anger and hurt feelings took over.

Restoring Long Feelings

Rage sometimes gets the better of us. No matter how good our intentions, there will be times when we are unable to restrain ourselves enough to make a brief statement of our anger or to exit. But it is reassuring to know that, even after an angry outburst, you can still establish a rapport with your child once again. Sometimes an apology is appropriate or you can make amends with humor. After the air has cleared, you can examine the problem that caused your rage and find more helpful solutions.

At the end of a stressful day at work, Curt's mother had just served herself spaghetti when Curt hopped up from his chair and knocked her plate off the table. Spaghetti and sauce splattered all over the floor.

Mom: "Curt! Can't you watch out?"

Curt: "Mommy, it was an accident. Remember when you dropped the bottle of orange juice?"

Mom: (picking up shards of plate and hurling them into the trash can): "Yes, but I can't even eat my food in peace. I am sick of your jumping up and down during my meal. You will sit at the table and finish eating until you are excused. Is that clear?"

Curt sat silently. Dinner was ruined. Later, the mother approached Curt:

Mom: "I really had a temper tantrum when that plate broke. I'm sorry I screamed. I know you didn't do it on purpose."

Curt: "Why did you yell at me?"

Mom: "Because you were the closest one to me. Who else could I yell at?"

Curt laughed.

An accidental spill at a moment when she was tired and hungry was enough to ignite the fuse of Curt's mother. But afterward she was able to make amends by using a term, "temper tantrum," that Curt could easily identify with. She lightened the mood by injecting humor ("Because you were the closest one to me") and restored good feelings without wallowing in guilt. She did not say, for example, "I'm a terrible mother for saying those things to you." Curt needed to know (as do all children) that although parents get angry, their loving feelings are not permanently lost.

When we make amends, children usually forgive because our good feelings are so essential to them. Two exchanges illustrate the difference between a parent who is unforgiving and another who can restore loving feelings after a sudden outburst:

Mom: "Mandy, you must take your bath now.!"

Mandy: "Well, I don't want to."

Mom: "Okay, either you take your bath or go straight to bed." (Mandy stood without moving, arms crossed defiantly) All right. Get to bed this minute."

Mandy ran to her room crying, and her mother slammed the door. Two minutes later, Mandy emerged wearing a bathrobe:

Mandy: "Mommy, I changed my mind. I do want to take a bath."

Mom: "Too bad. Go to bed dirty."

When Mandy began to defy her, Mother became furious. Uncomfortable with her mother's anger, Mandy did try to make amends but her mother didn't let her. Every child needs a second chance and an opportunity to be forgiven.

A parent who can make amends after a bitter confrontation restores the loving bond with her child. Inevitably, we will say things when enraged that we will later wish we'd never said. But when the storm has abated, we can say, "I wish I hadn't talked that way to you."

Philip had a history of biting other children, but he had not done so for many months. He and his mother were at a playground when Philip noticed one of his previous victims and approached her. The little girl's mother saw Philip and moved protectively toward her daughter. Suddenly the little girl cried and her mother shrieked, "He bit her! He bit her!"

Mom: (furious and humiliated) "Philip, come here this minute!"

Philip: "I only kissed her."

Mom: "I don't believe it! You're lying."

She dragged Philip away while the little girl screamed. Philip's mother felt her rage grow to fury. As soon as they arrived home, Philip protested repeatedly, "I didn't bite her. I wanted to kiss her and she wouldn't let me."

Mom: "If this is the way you're going to behave, I'm not taking you anywhere again."

Philip: "I didn't do anything to her. " Totally beside herself, she grabbed his shoulders and shook him. Then she slapped him in the face.

Mom: "Philip, I thought you'd stopped biting. I can't take you anywhere. I don't believe what you just did. Are you an animal or a little boy? I am sick about this. Go to your room."

She felt half-crazed. She sent him to his room because she feared what she might do to him if they remained together. She lay on the sofa for several minutes. Her temper slowly subsided, and she was sick with remorse. When she felt more composed, she knocked on Philip's door. He was stretched across his bed with his shoes still on. Mother sat on the bed beside him, and he took her hand silently.

Mom: "I wish I didn't get so mad and hit you."

Philip: "I just wanted to kiss her and she didn't want to." (He began to cry.) "I'm sorry, Mommy. I didn't mean to bite her. (With tears streaming down both their cheeks, she hugged him.)

Mom: "Oh, Philip, what can I do to help you?"

Philip: "I wanted to be friends. But nobody at the playground was nice to me. That big boy called me names and pushed me.

Mom: It's hard to make friends with new people, but you can't do it by hurting them.

Philip: "I know. But why did she scream? I only wanted to kiss her."

Mom: "Maybe when you feel like kissing a stranger, you could tell me and give me a kiss instead. What do you think?"
Philip: "Okay, Mommy. I love you."

At a museum a few days later, Philip saw another little girl and started talking to her. He then ran to his mother and whispered, "I feel like I want to give you a kiss, Mommy." His mom said, "Philip, you remembered!"

When I read this dialogue in a workshop, parents breathe an immense sigh of relief because they can identify with Philip's mother. It gives them a chance to talk about their own intense anger at their children. Anger is one of the most painful issues we struggle with as parents, because it seems so much at odds with the love we feel for our children. But by learning alternatives to hurting and insulting our kids, we can change their behavior, deepen our rapport with them, and show them a better way to express their own strong feelings.

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