

# Top Ways Parents Can Help Identify a Child's Anger and Manage It

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OFTEN, WHEN ONE THINKS OF 20/20, THEY THINK OF CLARITY OF VISION. WHEN WE REFLECT ON THE YEAR 2020, HOWEVER, WE WILL LIKELY THINK OF ANYTHING BUT CLARITY. THE YEAR WAS HALLMARKED BY PANDEMIC, CONFUSION, AND UNCERTAINTY IN JUST ABOUT EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS. IT WAS A YEAR WHEN WE BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE HOW PRECIOUS LITTLE CONTROL WE HAVE OVER THE WORLD, OUR HEALTH, AND THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE ITSELF.

**W**hen we recognize how trivial a role we have steering most aspects of our existence, we tend to try to dig in our nails to control those few items we believe we can muster some influence over. When our world spins at such a frenetic pace, we begin to feel anxiety, fear and worry. As we tread the waters of these emotions, we eventually may turn to anger as a means of addressing what we cannot seem to change.

Now, imagine our children who have even less control and understanding of the world around them. Having to quarantine, wear masks, or engage in virtual learning generates even greater worry, fear, and apprehension. As these emotions bubble under the surface, we may see a geyser of anger spring forth in our children's words and actions.

So how do we quell this volcano in the midst of a world that right now seems at a flashpoint of uncertainty and anger? The following suggestions may help to address these concerns.

## 1. Children equate routine with safety

Imagine if you were on an airplane and did not know where you were going. This would likely create enormous anxiety because you have no control nor knowledge of the final destination. This is the same for children who rely on parents and adults to tell them what is ahead. Despite the fact life has taken on a greater degree of unpredictability amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, trying to



keep as much routine at home as possible will alleviate anger-based anxiety.

## 2. “I don’t know” is a perfectly good answer

The world right now is encountering situations that are evolving and unpredictable. The answer “I don’t know” is perfectly acceptable as a parent because it is honest and avoids issues that may compromise trust if we give replies that are not accurate.

## 3. Be a good mirror of emotion

When we think of anger, it is never a single emotion. In other words, when a child (or any of us) feels anger, it is always due to some other parallel emotional trigger. For instance, if you see your child getting angry when remote learning, it helps to reflect another emotion aside from anger. “It seems you are frustrated you cannot understand the assignment...you seem worried you cannot get on the virtual learning program.” An accurate reflection of the full spectrum of emotions will help your child better comprehend their growing language of emotional expression.

## 4. You are entitled to be angry, but...

Anger is a perfectly acceptable emotion in light of everything our children have been through in recent months.

“As parents, we must take care of ourselves as best we can. Only then can we give our children the best we have.”

That being said, anger still has to be handled in an appropriate manner. Three simple components are necessary to allow for productive assertive versus aggressive communication. First, the child must express the emotion they are feeling. Second, in as detailed a manner as possible, discuss why they are feeling this emotion. Lastly, talk about what they believe they need to help resolve the anger they are encountering. Parents, siblings, and other people simply cannot “mind read” what a child needs when they are angry, so we must try to utilize these components as much as possible to allow for positive communication(s).



## 5. Avoid the news

As adults, we have a filter and frame of reference from which to understand the news. Children do not have that same understanding and may believe they are watching a situation occurring right outside their door. Further, when they see stories being repeated in the daily news cycle, each may seem like a new, overwhelming event. Fear can always lead to anxiety-based anger.

## 6. Socialization may still be needed

If your child is naturally more extroverted, the change to virtual learning and limited social contact can lead down a road of frustration and even anger. Encouraging supervised virtual playdates can help address this issue and avoid boredom-based anger.

## 7. Speaking of boredom

Staying at home can lead a child rapidly down the road to boredom-based anger. As parents, we may try to offset boredom by giving a list of options our children can do. Doing so can short-circuit their ability to find means of self-soothing effectively. It is the child's responsibility to try to independently come up with some items they can do to relieve boredom in conjunction with the parent as needed.

## 8. Remember, anger has two components

We often hear the words “fight or flight” when talking about anxiety. When we are anxious or in danger, our body prepares us to either engage in a conflict or run from it. When a child is angry, a similar situation is duplicated. This means they actually have two components in their anger: their thought component and their physical component. We may address the anger factor we see in the thought process and not notice the bodily components (i.e., the sweaty palms, the rapid heartbeat, the blood going to the extremities and away from the brain). In Daniel Goleman's 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, he determined it takes an average of 20 minutes for the

body to settle once an angry trigger has been activated in our thought process. If we don't allow both the physical and neurological factors to settle down, we will have constant peaks and valleys of anger generated from a single emotional trigger versus settling completely from an incident.

## 9. Look for fuel of the fire

When we get angry, we tend to use “black and white” thinking to support and further fuel our anger. Phrases such as “I am *always* in trouble...no one *ever* wants to play with me...I *should* be able to do that” seem to resonate. To stop fanning the flames of anger via identifying with the victim and righteous indignation, ask your child to look for exceptions. “Tell me about *two times* when you did the right thing and did not get in trouble. Tell me about a time when *someone wanted* to play with you. Tell me about *three times when you were allowed* to do something you wanted.” By doing this, you teach your child to debate their thoughts and offer a more balanced view of their world in general.

## 10. Crying and frustration are okay

Children experience grief and loss differently than adults and over some different triggers. For instance, if your child does not get a particular toy, they may grieve the toy they wanted to add to their collection. That being said, children have had to lose a lot within the pandemic. They have lost time with friends, a regular school experience, playing outside, and a host of other activities (both seen and unseen). Empathizing with these losses and letting them know you empathize with the frustration they feel is okay, and a discussion of this aspect of life is beneficial.

COVID-19 is an issue that has taken a physical and emotional toll. As parents, we must take care of ourselves as best we can. Only then can we give our children the best we have. If you are not at your personal best, you certainly cannot be fully there for those who need you most.



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