

Learning the Skills of Anger Management

Ready-to-Use Lessons for the Elementary Grades

"The angry man will defeat himself in battle as well as in life."

Introduction

Everyone gets angry. It's a normal emotion that we all experience throughout our lives. It can range from slight annoyance or minor irritation to full-blown rage. It can result from real or perceived injury, not getting what we want, and other stressful situations. Anger is difficult to hide. At the height of anger, faces may become flushed, breathing may accelerate, facial expressions become tight or contorted, the pitch of the voice rises, and body language reveals a defensive mode or closing down of communication. Anger may spur us to strike out verbally with accusations, sarcasm or insults, or physically, by slamming doors, throwing things, kicking furniture or hitting another person. We can also react to anger passively, by withdrawing into silence.

When I was a kindergarten teacher, I remember a child who got very angry because he didn't get his way while playing a game on the rug with a small group of his classmates. He began to scream at the top of his lungs, then he grabbed a large wooden building block about his own size and hurled it with amazing strength at the other children. Luckily, his aim was not as good as his strength, and he did not harm any of his classmates. I was a young, naive teacher at the time, and I scolded him while marching him to the office for timeout and principal's consequences. I had not yet learned to acknowledge the child's feelings of anger because I was so frightened by his behavior.

I have seen many other instances in my 26 years of teaching in grades K through six. On more than one occasion I have put the short-tempered and misbehaving student next to a quiet, kind student in the classroom, thinking that the influence of the well-behaved one would rub off on the one who acted out. The well-behaved student would complain very little, if at all. But on more than one occasion, I got a call from one of the parents of that student with concerns that the child, who previously loved school, no longer wanted to come. It took awhile for me to figure out that the child was really angry about being put next to the student who acted out. Because the well-behaved student didn't feel comfortable about expressing her anger, I never knew how annoyed and harassed she felt. She just held it in and became disenchanted with school.

Like myself, every elementary classroom teacher has had children in their classes who express their anger in inappropriate ways: biting, hitting, kicking, scratching, destroying property, verbal abuse and surreptitious behaviors such as stealing and lying. We have set out our expectations in the form of classroom rules and followed them up with consequences. These are very effective ways to manage behavior in the classroom. However, the students need to learn effective ways to control, express and release their anger on their own in order to become empowered, responsible, contributing members of the school, their peer groups and families. This is the road to becoming responsible, compassionate and contributing citizens of our society and the global community.

Perhaps in using these activities as a teaching tool in the classroom, we can prevent some of the inappropriate, and sometimes violent, "acting out" by those students who lack inner controls. With a heightened awareness, the quiet, well-behaved student can feel safe about voicing his or her anger at what appears an injustice. Learning together makes it easier because we can create a common language and understanding of the concepts of anger management. The students can become each other's teachers, coaching each other and practicing the skills until they become automatic.

The purposes of this book are to:

1. Explain in simple terms the nature of anger — what causes it and how it affects us physiologically, emotionally and mentally.
2. Make clear the role of thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions in controlling and releasing anger.
3. Present and explore components of an anger-management program.
4. Offer activities within each component that you can use to assist your children to develop a repertoire of anger-management skills.

Impulsive or aggressive behavior in response to anger is not uncommon, particularly in children. You've probably often observed the effects anger has on how receptive children are to teaching and learning in the classroom. Unbridled anger disrupts thinking and distorts behavior. It impairs a child's ability to make accurate judgments and to recall information. It can severely damage peer relations and lead to disciplinary action, delivering walloping blows to self-esteem.

*"The holiest
of all the spots on
earth is where
ancient hatred
has become a
present love."*

Children are often told to ignore their anger. When they cannot ignore it, they are expected to control it, but they are rarely shown how to do so. Consciously or unconsciously, children realize that we all experience anger. On television, anger and violence are inexorably linked, yet we admonish children not to fight, physically or verbally.

Adults often struggle with anger and fail to express or even admit it. Why? Many of us were trained as children that it was not OK to be angry, and it was unacceptable to express anger in any way. Many of us were made to feel guilty for showing anger, as if it were a bad behavior. It is a common myth in our society that anger is not good and should be eliminated. But we know it can't be. As we have matured into adulthood, most of us have learned to acknowledge, control and often release anger in spite of the discomfort of doing so. We know that if we try to suppress it, it will come out in other ways. Anger management has become a skill learned by experience, i.e. trial and error.

Dealing with children's anger can also be distressing, frustrating and puzzling for adults. This is because our own anger is stirred up as the child "acts out" her anger. We remember how our own caregivers treated us in these situations, and we want to handle them differently, with more compassion and fairness. But we wonder how to do so. We also are afraid of anger because it may mean that someone is out of control. Domestic violence, TV violence and road rage are contemporary examples of anger gone out of control. From the violence we see and hear on a daily basis, we know that angry outbursts aren't very productive. Yet we have also learned that bottling up anger can create depression and illness.

How do we, as teachers, counselors and parents, help children control and manage anger and upset inside and out of the classroom? How do we teach them that getting mad is OK and that there are healthy, effective ways to express, manage and release anger? We don't want to leave it to chance or temporary "Band-Aid" approaches. First and foremost, we begin by modeling appropriate anger management. As the old adage goes, "Children learn by example." Then we must move from where the child is into the direction of appropriate, acceptable behaviors through strategies directly taught, practiced, and practiced some more until they become automatic. Just as we would not expect children to learn musical instruments without massive amounts of practice, we must allow time and repetition to cultivate and solidify anger-management skills.

This book presents activities that address strategies elementary school children can learn in order to manage their anger in a variety of situations. These activities encompass the diverse learning modes and "multiple intelligences" that children possess. The activities should be enjoyed, and yet taken seriously. Each child is on the learning curve of emotional development and will grasp the concepts at her own level. Patience,

persistence and consistency on the part of the adult are critical and will reap their own rewards.

As adult caregivers, we must keep in mind that some children come to us from homes that have not supported their social and emotional development. Physical, sexual, verbal and other emotional abuse may be obstacles and deterrents to children learning the skills they need to control their behaviors. Hours of TV viewing and video games in which violence plays a major role take their toll on the speed at which children can internalize the healthy, life-changing concepts of anger management. Individual personalities and developmental stages are important factors that also must be considered. Some children may require more intervention, practice and monitoring than others. A child who displays violent behaviors consistently or who appears depressed may need additional professional help. However, the activities in this book can serve as a springboard to their healing and help create behavior changes.

The activities in this book are designed to assist and train children to acknowledge, accept and manage their anger. As children learn to deal with their anger, they will feel more in control of their lives. It is a step toward positive and powerful self-esteem. Have fun with this guide and allow the children you work with to dive into the activities, exhibit their own creativity, and grow at their own pace. Look for the small steps that each child makes on the path to developing and internalizing an anger-management system. Above all, have faith in yourself as a facilitator, and trust the process.

Basic Concepts

The concepts and premises upon which the activities in this book were created include the following:

Anger is a normal, healthy human emotion and, as such is OK.

Anger serves as a signal and can protect us.

The feeling is not the same as the behavior.

It is how we react to a situation, not the situation itself, that causes our anger.

It is not OK to hurt yourself, another person or anyone's property.

Anger is generally not the problem, the mismanagement of it is.

Thoughts come before feelings, therefore we can become aware of the feelings created by our thoughts.

If we can change our mind about something, we may be able to change the feeling.

We have choices as to how we react to any situation.

Anger can be used to positively motivate us.

Underlying issues that create anger include issues of power, capabilities, fairness and recognition.

It is good to learn the language that can identify and express anger.

There are healthy ways to express anger.

There are healthy ways to release anger.

Movement can assist in calming feelings and focusing thoughts.

Deep breathing can help calm and dissipate anger.

Repressed anger may become explosive.

Repressed anger can be harmful to one's health.

Stating what you feel, why you feel it and what you want is a healthy way to become assertive.

Each of us is responsible for our own feelings and behavior.

How to Use This Book

This book is divided into five sections: Understanding anger, Expressing Anger, Managing Anger, Releasing Anger, and Literature Connections. Each of the first four sections begins with two "Sharing Circles" and contains a variety of activities and a culminating worksheet. The chapters can be taken in any order, depending on the developmental level and needs of the students. You can pick and choose from the activities in any given chapter, but it is helpful to conduct the Sharing Circles first in order to connect the children's life experiences with the new things they learn.

The Sharing Circle

The Sharing Circle is an organized discussion format that encourages spontaneous sharing in response to a given TOPIC. No two Sharing Circles are the same, even with the same topic, because every participant brings a different set of views and experiences to the process. The topics in this guide allow children to explore the subject of anger with one another, to appreciate themselves and others as developing persons, to practice communication skills, and to develop empathy with others.

The objectives of the Sharing Circle are to increase children's understanding of themselves, their self-esteem and sense of social responsibility, and to create a bridge from the children's set of knowledge and experiences to the desired skills. To achieve these objectives, the Sharing Circle uses a circular, small-group (of six to 12) seating arrangement; ground rules that set the tone for personal privacy and safety; and a procedural structure that invites each child to share, give reflective feedback and cognitively summarize what he or she has learned.

This discussion group is an activity just like others in the book, with desired objectives and outcomes. As such, there are procedures to follow and rules of conduct to guarantee that the objectives have the best opportunity to be met. As the leader of the Sharing Circle, you state

"'I lose my temper, but it's all over in a minute,' said the student. 'So is the hydrogen bomb,' I replied, 'but think of the damage it produces.'"

and enforce these simple rules of considerate conduct, model your own respect for those rules, lead the discussion, and listen carefully to what the children say. The steps for conducting the Sharing Circle include:

1. **Set the tone.** Be enthusiastic, smile, use eye contact and gestures to let the children feel welcome in the group. Make sure that you are sitting in a circle so everyone can be seen.

2. **Review the Sharing Circle Rules:**

Bring yourself, and nothing else, to the circle.

Everyone, including the leader, gets one turn to share.

We don't have to take a turn if we don't want to.

We share the time equally.

We listen to the person who is speaking.

We stay in our own space and keep our hands and feet to ourselves.

We don't interrupt or put down another person.

3. **Introduce the topic and elaborate on the topic.** State the topic first, and then take a minute to clarify what the session is about and give examples of possible responses so that the children can get some ideas for their responses. Restate the topic. Then provide a few seconds of quiet thinking time before opening up to sharing.

4. **Give each child who takes a turn about one minute to share.** It is important that this portion of the time be completely free of judgment, advice or any other sort of distracting or negating comments, even if the children copy each other's responses or make up unrealistic stories.

5. **Optional: Conduct a review (approximately half a minute per participant).** This step offers the children who contributed a chance to hear other circle members tell them what they heard them share. Its purpose is to sharpen listening and observation skills, to give circle members another chance to participate verbally, and to assure children who spoke that they were

listened to. Keep in mind that this is offered at your discretion.

6. **Lead a summary.** Ask an open-ended question to stimulate thought and free discussion regarding the concepts, lessons and other connections that can be made as a result of the sharing. This meets the needs of everyone involved to find meaning in the discussion. Each Sharing Circle in this book includes two or more summary questions; however, you may want to formulate questions that are more appropriate to the level of understanding of your students. Do not confuse the summary with the review. The review is optional; the summary is not. The summary serves as a necessary culmination to each Sharing Circle by allowing the children to clarify the key concepts gained from the session.
7. **Close the circle.** Thank the children for their cooperation, sharing and listening. Announce that the circle is over.

“Brain Gym”™

Some of the activities in this guide are taken from the book “Brain Gym” (1986) by Paul E. Dennison, Ph.D., a pioneer in applied brain research, and Gail Dennison, and are used with permission. “Brain Gym” is based on whole-brain learning, kinesiology, movement repatterning, “Touch for Health” and other types of sensorimotor training. The movement repatterning in “Brain Gym” activities enables students to access those parts of the brain previously inaccessible to them. “Brain Gym” activities were found to stimulate, release or relax students involved in particular learning situations. “Brain Gym” is a registered trademark of the Educational Kinesiology Foundation, Ventura, Calif.