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# Working with Fathers...Fathers and New Lessons about Anger

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# Working with Fathers...

By Glen Palm, Ph.D.

## Fathers and New Lessons about Anger

Key Words:



fathering, anger, guilt, abuse, power, "feeling curve", emotional coaching

The topic of anger management is a popular and important issue for fathers. Men face some special challenges as they learn constructive ways to respond to their children's anger and to clearly express their own anger as parents. These challenges are related to male socialization messages around anger and control. Anger is a legitimate feeling but other feelings are often denied. When fathers get angry at their children, only the anger comes out, not the empathy. The habits around anger expression may also reflect male socialization towards threats and physical aggression. Socialization messages around control and power may also play a role in how fathers think about anger in relation to their children. Fathers want to show children they are the boss and they won't let children push them around. While firm guidance can be a virtue that men bring to parenting, rigid control leads to power struggles and frequently escalates angry feelings between father and child. Children push the limits of male patience and challenge their sense of power and control. The toddler who collapses at the checkout counter in the grocery store and demands candy, the overtired five-year-old who refuses to go to bed, the 13-year-old who won't clean his room or the 16-year-old who lies about what time she came home last night, all challenge fathers' sense of power and control. The depth of the feelings of frustration and rage that bubble up or strike like lightning are challenges to the best of fathers. Fathers' interactions with their children can be battlegrounds for reliving old conflicts or testing grounds for learning new ways to express anger.

In working with fathers and observing many parent education sessions over the last 10-15 years, the issues around anger are some of the most difficult to address. It is not the first topic that one talks about in a parent education group. For men it may be especially difficult to talk about since the feelings are so deep and the guilt associated with some patterns of anger are connected with the issue of abuse. This topic can initially be approached by talking about children and anger and the role of fathers as models for the healthy expression of angry feelings. This indirect approach allows men to focus on their children first. This provides the motivation for carefully examining one's own habits and attitudes towards anger at a later time. The topic of anger in children and anger management in fathers could take several sessions. It is a topic that I often weave into a variety of topics from child development to discipline to adult growth through parenting.

The following are some ideas and resources that may be helpful in creating lesson plans about management for fathers. The first part addresses children as the focus while the second part looks directly at fathers and anger.

### Young Children Learning about Anger

The goals of a session around children and anger may include:

- Fathers will understand how children express anger at different ages.
- Fathers will clarify their own ideas about healthy and acceptable expressions of anger in children.
- Fathers will learn about the dynamics of anger and emotions in general.
- Fathers will explore some specific strategies for managing children's anger and teaching healthy expression of anger.

“...it becomes obvious that there are not very many acceptable ways for children to express anger.”

“...there is a window of opportunity for learning about emotions.”



Children's patterns of expressing anger are addressed in a variety of resources. Child development texts touch upon anger in indirect ways. They provide some description of anger and aggression but don't help parents to distinguish constructive and age-appropriate expression of anger in children. The *Anger Management for Parents* program (1995) is an excellent resource for describing the concrete expressions of anger at different developmental stages. Children's own expressions of anger and needs are some of the most powerful triggers for parental anger. The toddler who throws his food on the floor and says, "Yucky," the four-year-old who yells, "I hate you" to her dad and the 11-year-old who complains about being asked to do the dishes, "I don't think I should do all the work around here," are some common examples of children getting angry. In examining the typical ways that children express anger it becomes obvious that there are not very many acceptable ways for children to express anger. Parents are generally focused on extinguishing angry feelings. It is often the feeling itself that we don't want to confront. Children's anger can frequently trigger our own negative feelings. It is hard to accept a child's anger as valid especially if it is directed at us as parents. A quick review of common ways that children express anger during the first five to six years brings us face to face with the question: "Is anger ever a legitimate feeling for children to express?" And secondly, "How can we teach children to express anger in age-appropriate and constructive ways?" The parent role as teacher/socializer is critical. Parents are responsible for limiting expressions of anger that are destructive but at the same time they must teach children that anger can be legitimate and must be expressed in a constructive manner.

A second concept that I have found very useful in describing children's anger has been the *Feeling Curve* from the book, *Raising a Boy* (Elium and Elium, 1992). The feeling curve provides a graphic description of the dynamic nature of all feelings that bring us into a state called the non-thinking zone after the feeling has been triggered. The important lesson from the feeling curve is the description of a basic set of laws that govern how feelings typically run their course in our lives. This model also provides some important guidelines for intervening and teaching about feelings in an effective manner. It typically does not work to try to teach any new insights or behaviors during the stage of emotion expression known as the non-thinking zone. However, there is a specific time when the emotion has subsided or run its course, but the memory is still fresh and there is a window of opportunity for learning about emotions. This is called the clear thinking zone. Parents learn from this model that they have the responsibility for teaching children how to manage feelings by developing good habits during the non-thinking zone and helping children to become aware of their feelings and how to anticipate when they may be approaching the non-thinking zone.

Another resource for helping fathers to understand anger in children is the work of John Gottman (1997) who talks about the parental task of raising an emotionally intelligent child in his book *The Heart of Parenting*. Gottman builds upon the idea that children learn how to be emotionally intelligent from *parental coaching*. This particular view connects to fathers and their sense of responsibility for being a teacher or a coach for their child. Gottman makes a strong case for understanding and accepting children's true feelings as well as coaching them how to understand and express feelings in a healthy and appropriate manner. He provides very clear strategies for helping parents to coach children in the healthy expression of feelings. Negative feelings such as anger can be seen as an opportunity for increasing emotional intimacy between fathers and children when fathers learn how to accept the feelings and teach children how to express anger in a constructive manner.

In summary, there are a number of important resources about anger and children that can provide some clear direction for dads in understanding and teaching their children about feelings and especially about anger. Eventually, the obvious

## Understanding Our Own Anger

question will emerge from this perspective. "What kind of role model am I for my child?" It is essential for fathers to understand the typical expression of anger that children use at different ages, the causes of anger in children, the dynamics of anger and the need to limit and redirect expression of anger in children. Father as model now places the focus on dads and their understanding and habits around their own anger. For fathers to take on the role of teacher or 'emotion coach' they must also take a look at their own attitudes and habits around anger.

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A set of learner outcomes for this second stage may include the following. These build upon the first set of goals.

- ▣ Fathers will understand their own patterns of anger expression.
- ▣ Fathers will identify some of the underlying causes and triggers of their own anger.
- ▣ Fathers will share some ideas for how to express and manage their own anger in a constructive manner.

The topic of anger in fathers can be introduced by using stories that depict male anger. Stories can be used to help fathers identify some of the influences of male socialization for learning how to express anger (see the list of resources at the end). An important set of basic assumptions about anger can be presented after a discussion around the messages about anger that fathers received as they grew up. These assumptions include:

- \* Anger is a legitimate and complex feeling.
- \* Anger is composed of messages (attitudes) that we have learned and behavior (habits) that we have learned.
- \* Stress often pushes individuals into negative patterns of anger expression.

The non-thinking zone from Eilum and Eilum (1992) can be used to help men to examine some of their thinking and habits related to anger with their children. It can also be helpful for fathers to identify a set of trigger events that often lead to anger. These may include fatigue, children's temperament and embarrassment about the lack of control they have over their children.

Another part of understanding anger is to recognize initial signs of anger. The Anger Management for Parents (1995) program includes an exercise for parents to identify different aspects of anger. First, it is important to recognize how your body reacts to being angry. Do you get hot, red-faced, heart rate increases, etc.? A second aspect of our anger is the inner thinking that often escalates our level of anger; for example, "I am a bad parent when my child misbehaves" or "I have to teach my children that I am the boss." Finally, a third aspect of anger recognition is to examine the actions or habits we have developed when we are angry at our children. Do we yell, demand perfection, quickly punish or give up and distance ourselves? It is important to understand what our anger looks like. Fathers can reflect upon their own thinking and behavior and how it relates to the models they would like to be for their children. Are we teaching them the habits we want to teach by our own behavior?

## Developing New Skills

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There are many different skills that are involved in managing anger. The Anger Management for Parents program describes seven different skill areas to address using the word **RETHINK**. They include **Recognize** your anger: **Empathize** with your child. What do you **Think** about when you get angry? Do you **Hear** the other person? Do you **Integrate** anger with love and respect? What do you **Notice** about your body when angry? And finally, **Keeping** the conversation in the present. This framework illustrates the variety of skills that are involved in anger management. *The Positive Parenting* program (1995) offers a simpler

version for controlling anger. There are four steps, *Stop* and cool off, *Look* and *Listen* to the situation, *Think* to form a plan, and *Act* to carry out your plan.

The key steps in anger management seem to be the ability to recognize the first signs of anger, understand the thinking behind anger, develop good habits to express anger and to listen to other's anger without getting immediately engaged in the feeling. A key piece for fathers who are developing new skills is to keep in mind their roles as both model and coach for their children.

## Summary

Anger is a complex feeling that men learn about in their families of origin and through male socialization. Thoughts and habits related to anger expression in men are deep-rooted. Fathers of young children have a unique opportunity to reconstruct male habits and thinking around anger as they negotiate the emotion-laden terrain of parenthood. Some of the skills and attitudes discussed in this article can be introduced at different times around other topics such as managing stress, discipline and communication. A session on children's anger can help fathers take a fresh look at their own thoughts and habits. Dads who recognize the important role they play as emotion coaches for their own children may better understand the need to learn new ways to think and act in this area. A session that focuses on anger management for fathers must build on previous skills and understanding and encourage fathers to carefully examine their own thinking and habits around anger. Modeling of constructive anger may be one of the most important lessons fathers can teach their young children.

## Resources

Elium, D. & Elium, J. (1996). *Raising a Son; Parents and the Making of a Healthy Man*. Celestial Arts.

Gottman, J. with Declaire, J. (1997). *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

Minnesota Extension Service (1995). *Positive Parenting: Alternatives to physical punishment of children*. University of Minnesota: St. Paul, MN. (To order call 800-876-8636.)

Institute for Mental Health Initiatives. (1991). *Anger Management for Parents*. Research Press: Champaign, IL. (To order call 800-519-2707.)

## Sources for stories with fathers

Abbott, F. (1993). *Boyhood, Growing Up Male*. The Crossing Press: Freedom, CA.

Pederson, A. & O'Meara, P. (Eds.). (1990). *Being a Father: Family, Work and Self*. John Muir Publication: Santa Fe, NM.

Winokur, J. (Ed.). (1993). *Fathers*. Penguin Books: New York.

O'Neill, H. (1996). *A Man Called Daddy*. Rutledge Hill Press: Nashville, TN.

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