

## EXPRESSING ANGER WITH CHILDREN: A DEVELOPMENTAL LOOK

By Laura Davis and Janis Keyser

When we are thinking about expressing anger with children, it is essential to take into consideration how children at various ages might experience expressions of anger. Even preverbal children can read our angry cues: our tone of voice and our body tension. When we are angry with them or when we are angry in their presence, it is important to remember that they can read our feelings even if they can't understand exactly what our anger is about.

Infants and young toddlers see the world from an egocentric perspective. They don't differentiate between their feelings and the feelings of the people who are close to them. It can be very upsetting for a baby or young toddler to be with an adult who is regularly becoming enraged or who is angry for an extended period of time. Not only can this be very frightening for them, but it can also undermine the feelings of safety and trust which are crucial to their growth.

Also, since babies and toddlers don't have a sophisticated sense of time, they don't realize that you can be furious now, and not furious later. Young children may think that your present state is permanent. As children mature, their sense of time evolves. Children older than three can begin to understand it when you say, "I'm feeling very mad right now, but I'll feel better in a little while."

Children's development and parents' anger also dovetail around the issue of expectations. Often parents are surprised when they suddenly feel angry about something that hadn't upset them before. Esteban explained, "I expect an eight-month-old to spill her juice, but when my three-year-old does it, I explode." Many of us are not even fully conscious that our expectations of our kids have changed until we find ourselves furious at them about some aspect of their behavior.

It's natural that our expectations about children's behavior change as they grow and become more competent. But often our expectations take a bigger leap than our child is ready to make, and we may need to adjust our expectations in order to reduce our frustration and anger.

### Getting Mad at Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

How can parents appropriately express anger to infants, toddlers and preschoolers? For babies and toddlers, expressions should be short and clear, using a serious tone of

voice and matching body language: "I don't like it when you bite me. We're going to stop nursing now." Or, "I get mad when you throw toys at the door. I'm going to put the hard ones away."

If you feel like you need to yell or hit, put your baby in a safe place (like in a crib), and go into the other room for a few minutes to vent your anger physically without scaring your child. You may also feel the need to talk about your frustration later with a friend. But your infant, one-year-old or two-year-old is too young to bear the full impact of that kind of anger and frustration.

Preschoolers can handle more information about your anger and some may even be able to deal with your raised voice: "I feel really upset! I don't like it when you dump all of your socks out of the drawer! It took me a long time to fold them and put them in there. I want you to help me put them back in the drawer." Again, remove yourself if you aren't able to control the intensity of your anger.

### Finding Other Outlets

Expressing anger appropriately with children often necessitates that we find other outlets for our feelings. Some parents find these in the moment; others plan regular activities throughout the week that reduce their stress levels. This topic came up in Janis's class one afternoon. Janis posed the question, "What do you do when you get really angry at your kids?"

Ross shared, "I go upstairs into my room, close the door, roll up a towel and whack it on the bed for a few minutes. Then I'm ready to go back down and talk to my daughter."

Elaine added, "Digging in the dirt helps me. I can always tell when I haven't gotten my weekly gardening time in. I'm much more likely to lose it with my kids."

And Vanessa said, "I go in my room, close the door and yell into a pillow. That way I can yell as loud as I want and the kids don't hear me."

Finding the match between your need for expression and your child's ability to tolerate that expression takes time and practice. But it's important that you work to discover satisfying ways to express anger which communicate feelings

and limits to children without overwhelming them. In doing so, you will be providing a model of anger that is clear and

honest, without being hurtful.

## TO YELL OR NOT TO YELL?

By Laura Davis & Janis Keyser

Many of us understand that hitting or spanking a child is a hurtful way to express our feelings. Yet we may be less clear about the impact of yelling.

When we discuss yelling, it is important to remember that each family has its communication style. Some families are robust and loud in all of their interactions. Others hardly speak above a whisper. Part of what children learn at home includes "how people communicate in our family."

There are several different kinds of yelling. There is shouting with the goal of changing your child's behavior, which includes raising your voice to get her attention, to scare her or shame her into doing what you want.

Blaming and name-calling fall into this category: "You're stupid. You never understand what I tell you!" That kind of yelling often "just comes out" when we feel overwhelmed and it usually arises from our own hurts, present or past. Berating another person, no matter what our goal, is hurtful behavior. Children can be as hurt emotionally by this as they are by being hit.

Some yelling helps us get out our feelings. Parents yell in frustration; they yell to let off steam. This kind of yelling ranges from the familiar ranting and raving: "This family is driving me CRAZY!!" to the more positive "I messages": "I get so furious when you leave the door open and let the flies in!"

There is also screaming in the vicinity of our children, but not directly at them: "I hate it when this house is such a mess!" Or we yell at our spouse within our child's earshot: "I'm so sick of it! You never take out the trash without being reminded!"

Yelling at children about our feelings, without making them responsible for those feelings, can be tolerable for specific children at certain ages. Children who aren't terrified by loud voices can learn to hear the content of our message without being overwhelmed.

Likewise, if the yelling is directed at another person or toward the world in general, and does not contain hurtful language, some children will be able to tolerate it in their vicinity. However, if fights in front of children become hurtful or too intense, they can be very scary for children.

Children's ability to deal with yelling is related to their age and temperament, as well as the norms in their family. The younger the child, the more possible it is that he will be startled or frightened by a raised voice. However, even older children who are especially sensitive may react strongly to yelling.

### Finding New Ways to Express Your Frustration

While yelling at children is rarely the most useful form of communication, many of us find ourselves doing it regularly. Even when we recognize that yelling distresses our children, most of us won't be able to immediately change our behavior. Developing a new communication style can be especially challenging for those of us who are used to expressing ourselves loudly, or who grew up in families where yelling was the norm.

In order to make a change, we first need to think about all of the different ways we could satisfactorily express our anger without scaring our children. Then we need to pay close attention to the response of our particular child when we express anger. This kind of observation can yield important clues about the kind of expressions that are appropriate with each of our children.

Figuring out expressions of anger which are satisfying to us and which also meet the needs of our children will, not doubt be a project we work on over time.

---

The above excerpts are from *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be: A Sourcebook of Strategies for the First Five Years* (Broadway Books, 1997) by Laura Davis and Janis Keyser.

Laura Davis is the co-author of the best-selling *Courage to Heal* and the author of *The Courage to Heal Workbook* and *Allies in Healing*. She is the mother of two children under five and the stepmother of a young adult. She writes a monthly column for parents in Santa Cruz, CA

Janis Keyser is a parenting educator and program director. She teaches in the Early Childhood Education Department at Cabrillo College and has been conducting workshops and parenting classes for twenty years. She is the mother of three, the stepmother of five and the grandmother of twelve.

J:\pcs\chcare\r&r\handout\mar99.par

