

# HELPING YOUR PRETEEN DEAL WITH ANGER

Your kids may get straight *As* in school or star on athletic teams, but all those accomplishments will be for naught if they do not learn how to express their anger appropriately. Teaching children how to deal with anger is one of the most important responsibilities a parent has.

When our children were approximately 8, 10 and 12, we had a family meeting to discuss how our family was dealing with anger. Part way through our meeting two of our children got up from the table crying and left for their rooms; our other child sat at the table a few more minutes, then got up angry and went to his room. Although the meeting was painful, it definitely illustrated that our family was not doing a very good job of expressing anger in healthy ways! It made us realize that we needed to teach our children how to deal with anger appropriately, and the results of our efforts have been very positive.

It's natural to get upset when a child yells at you or says "I hate you," or hits a sibling in anger. Children are not born with an innate ability to express anger effectively. They must be taught how to express anger in constructive ways. Unfortunately, many parents do not realize the need to teach their kids *how* to express their anger. Many parents have

not had help in learning to express their own anger effectively. When I have asked groups of parents if they were able to express their anger to their own parents, only four or five hands in every 100 go up, illustrating how few parents were taught how to deal with anger in a healthy way.



## THE ANGER LADDER

Let's consider the range of ways kids and parents express anger. Imagine a ladder and at the top of the ladder is the most effective way to express anger, and at the bottom of the ladder is the worst way to deal with anger. Imagine yourself as a child, angry at your father because you feel you have too many chores. The steps of the ladder going from best to worst would be as follows:

## BEST WAY TO EXPRESS ANGER:

1. Tell Dad you are upset about the chores. The two of you talk

calmly to resolve the problem (less chores, more money, more time to complete them, etc.). (Anger is acknowledged and dealt with appropriately in a direct, healthy manner.)

2. Yell at Dad that you are upset about the chores. (Directing anger toward Dad and mentioning the problem, chores, is healthy but yelling is not healthy.)
3. Yelling at Dad, "I hate you." (Directing anger at Dad is healthy, but the yelling and nonspecific "I hate you" is not.)
4. Slamming a door, or breaking something.
5. Hitting a younger sibling. (While the results of points four and five are undesirable, they rank higher up the ladder than six and seven because the anger is at least more observable, and therefore, easier to deal with.)
6. Keeping anger in. (This approach is very destructive because it will usually result in some physical problems, and will often develop into a passive-aggressive way of dealing with anger.)
7. Passive-aggressive approach to dealing with anger. (The passive-aggressive way of dealing with anger is the most destructive because the child is usually

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not even aware that he or she is demonstrating anger, and the results can be extremely negative to the child him- or herself. One definition of passive-aggressive behavior is an action that makes someone angry while unconsciously hurting oneself.) Some typical examples are procrastinating, dawdling or moving slowly, getting *Ds* and *Fs* in school, doing drugs or alcohol, not taking one's medication for Attention Deficit Disorder and having a messy room.

All kids will show some passive-aggressive behaviors. And, to a certain degree, that's OK. For example, your child may keep his or her room looking like a disaster zone. Most parents misinterpret the reason for a messy room and/or feel that they are losing control if they allow their kids to make decisions about how their rooms will look. However, it's often best to allow kids to have messy rooms for at least part of the week, otherwise they may opt for more destructive ways of being passive aggressive, such as getting low grades. Parents of preteens need to pick their battles carefully, concentrating on more important issues and challenges. A messy room can simply be one way for a preteen to be different from his or her parents.

Your child's position on the anger ladder may vary from day to day, but will also be influenced by his or her personality. Some kids come into the world with a tendency to blast you with their anger by yelling at you, while others tend to keep their anger in.

Regardless of a child's natural tendencies in expression, it is very important for parents to create a climate in which kids are able to express their feelings, including anger.

## EXPRESS ANGER POSITIVELY

There are several ways to help preteens learn how to express their anger in a more positive manner.

- ◆ The first is to model appropriate behavior when you express anger to them and to others.
- ◆ Another way is to encourage kids to tell you what you might have done lately that makes them angry. Then be prepared to simply listen, accept their feelings, and possibly discuss some solutions to the problem.
- ◆ Some preteens will definitely need to be encouraged to verbalize their anger: Give them permission.
- ◆ Reward your preteens verbally and/or with tangible rewards when they express anger appropriately.

◆ It will also be necessary at times to enforce a penalty, such as a fine or grounding, when kids express their anger in inappropriate ways (by swearing, hitting, or breaking something.) For less destructive expression, such as slamming a door, it may be appropriate to simply ignore the behavior and make an effort later to encourage kids to express their feelings.

In short, parents can teach their preteens to move toward the top of the anger ladder by frequently asking if they are angry about anything parents have done, ignoring some inappropriate ways of expressing anger, and punishing destructive, inappropriate ways of expressing anger. Parents have the power to negotiate solutions to problems with their kids; kids do not have the power to do that. So if your goal is for your children to express anger appropriately, you'll need to reach compromises with your kids whenever possible. In this way, you are modeling behavior that is considerate and sympathetic of their needs.

### A CHALLENGE TO YOU:

1. Reflect on the ways anger was dealt with in your family when you were a teenager.
2. Ask your child if you have done anything lately that makes him or her angry, and discuss a solution to the problem.
3. Discuss the anger ladder with your kids, identifying where each of you is on the anger ladder and planning ways to encourage each other to move up the ladder.