

ANGER MANAGEMENT – Dealing with children and Adolescents

The recent newspaper reports of a parent who beat a son to death and that of family members who had disciplined a 14 year old boy by slashing him with a knife, highlights an issue that is seldom attended to in this punitive and patriarchal society of ours – the issue of Anger Management. Over the last few weeks this issue also came to the fore when some parents approached me on how to deal with temper tantrums from their children and teenagers. They confessed to ‘losing it’ many times and beating their children, especially when the behaviours were accompanied by rudeness and insults from their ‘ungrateful’ kids. In two of the instances, school teachers had called the parents from their jobs, to take their kids home.

Children can be disrespectful, rude and display inappropriate behaviours which make parents frustrated, anxious and at times, afraid of them. When parents try to placate these behaviours by pleading, talking or giving in, children can become manipulative so that instead of the parent being in control, the child controls the situation and continues to make consistent demands – for attention or for material things.

Afraid of these temper outbursts, parents give in and walk on eggshells around their child. In other situations, it seems easier to put a stop to uncontrollable behaviours through intimidation and punishment, beating the ‘badness’ out of the child. This is usually to no avail as the beatings may stop the behaviours, but only for a short while.

Teenagers and children lash out at persons or situations that make them angry, as they are often bombarded with difficult and new challenges daily – friends who ignore them at school, a joke or criticism, teachers who may humiliate or embarrass them, parents who argue or are constantly ‘on their case’, the death of a pet or grandmother or loss of some kind. While some children may control their tempers (and this is learned or imitated from adults who model this), other children have difficulty and struggle to do so. **Developing effective strategies to cope with your anger and your child/teenager's anger is a process that requires time, persistence and self-control.** It does not happen overnight.

Anger is a normal emotion. **It is not the anger, but the behaviour that follows the anger that is usually of concern**, and these behaviours are influenced by the child or teenager’s perception of a situation that triggers this emotion. Anger makes us uncomfortable, whether it is from a child or an adult, and it is a natural response to try to placate the situation so that the anger would subside.

You may not be able to stop the triggers, but it is necessary to help the person to understand where the anger is coming from, and to give the child the tools to cope and to manage the 'meltdown' when it occurs.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a parent or a teacher, you can -

- Help the child/adolescent to **identify the triggers** that brought about the angry response. Allow him/her to describe these triggers.
- Let them **come up with a plan to cope** with the situation if it occurs again. Planning ahead allows the child an alternative to the meltdown – walk away, go to the bathroom, talk to someone.
- **Control your own emotions.** Don't allow a child's rage to trigger your own negative emotions, so that you respond in ways that are reactive and of no benefit to the child such as shouting back, arguing or giving in to what he/she wants. Take a step back. Breathe. Do not give ultimatums when you are angry, but hold teenagers accountable when things have calmed down.

Finally, get support if needed. Helping your child or teenager to control their anger is part of the learning process. **Strengthen his/her coping skills. And strengthen your own.**