



# WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THAT ANGER

By Allison Davis, MS, LMFT

“I hate you! You’re not my mother!”  
“I don’t have to listen to you,”  
“Go to hell” and other expletives are all relatively common phrases from some of our kids and teens in foster care. Have you ever tried parenting a child who puts his fist through the wall when you ask him to do his homework? How do you parent a child who is irritable and angry from the moment she wakes up?

Children in foster care have experienced varying degrees of trauma, neglect and multiple placements. These children have experienced overwhelming amounts of internal emotional distress at an age when they were ill-equipped to manage their emotional states or distress. The end result is that children in foster care often have a lot of BIG and INTENSE emotions with little ability to articulate and express what they are feeling and why they are feeling it. (By

the way, many adults struggle with this as well).

Anger is a common by-product of all this pain and suffering. It is often misunderstood, miscommunicated and displaced. Early interpersonal trauma forces the child’s social-emotional brain (right hemisphere) to adapt to a hostile or neglectful environment. The result for the child is that all systems of the social brain become shaped for “offensive” and “defensive” purposes. The child is often stuck in survival mode, often using strategies to defend (not learn), attack (not cooperate), avoid (not connect) and provoke (not please).

## Attachment and Anger

What happens when a child who has suffered chronic neglect and relational trauma joins your family? The emotional demands placed upon the parents are intense, complex and

unlike any other intimate emotional relationship. Emotions are contagious; it’s easy to “catch” an emotion, especially anger. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge for parents and caregivers. What to do with all that anger — theirs and ours.

The most critical ingredient of the parent-child relationship is the pattern of emotional communication between the parent and child. Humans are social-emotional beings with an innate need to connect and form meaningful relationships. The child learns how to get needs met through human connectedness. Learning (or re-learning) how attachment works is essential as it enables the child to learn how to create and sustain meaningful, loving human connections. In order for this to occur, the parent needs to be able to lead the way. This requires that the parent not follow the child into

distress and anger but respond by modeling for the child how to manage intense, and at times, overwhelming emotions.

For parents, it's important to remember that we are built to feel. We are social-emotional creatures and are built to be impacted by the emotions of others. If you ran into your friend who was jumping up and down with excitement because they just won the lottery, you would feel excitement and joy. If you ran into a good friend who just lost a loved one and was grieving, you would feel sad. If you're parenting a child who is irritable and angry, it's common to feel irritable and angry. Acknowledging the anger is important (because ignoring it doesn't make it go away).

Toxic stress and anger needs to be discharged from the body. When we are angry, stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol generate increased blood flow to the hands and large muscles, preparing us with the energy needed to fight, flee or survive. Chronic stress and anger take a toll on our physical and mental well-being. For parents who find themselves being angry and irritable most days, developing a plan to release the anger and stress from the body and mind is important.

### Parents De-Stress Plan

1. Acknowledge and identify angry/hurt feelings:  
"I'm angry because \_\_\_\_\_."  
"I'm hurt because \_\_\_\_\_."
2. Develop a daily plan to discharge anger/stress:
  - From the body: "I'll walk around the block three times today."
  - From the mind: "I'll start a 'feelings journal' to identify and express my emotions."

The more parents are in touch with their own internal feeling states, the more they are able to effectively manage their own intense emotions. Increased emotional intelligence is important when parenting children with a history of trauma, loss and neglect. Having increased emotional intelligence does not mean that parents have to be perfect and never show any difficult emotion, such as anger and frustration. In fact, it is

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quite the opposite. The child needs you to express all of your emotions — not just the warm fuzzy ones, so he or she can see how it's done. The difference here is that parents with increased emotional intelligence are not just "emotionally reacting" to external stressors. They model healthy ways to express and manage their own internal distress, anger and frustration. An upset parent might say, "I'm really frustrated and angry right now, I'm going to take a few minutes to calm down and think about what just happened."

### Children Primarily Learn Through Imitation and From Our Example

Parents set the emotional tone within the family and can develop a bag of tricks to alleviate the stress and anger in the home. This can include physical activity, exercise, hiking, yoga, joke night at the dinner table, all-day pajama day, game night, anger practice, role reversal night at the dinner table where the kids fix dinner and the parents get to whine, or play feelings charades. Parents who are creative and

playful will find that they are teaching their kids how to cope effectively with life's stressors.

### An Angry Child is a Hurt Child

Children communicate their distress and anger through their physiology and behaviors. Due to children's social, emotional, cognitive and brain development, most children have not yet attained the skills necessary to verbalize their angry or hurt feelings.

Subsequently, parents may see more "acting out" behaviors as children discharge toxic stress, grief and pain.

We know that punishing children with histories of trauma, neglect and attachment disruptions is ineffective, as punishment does not actively add or teach anything. In fact, when parents use anger and negative reinforcement, it most typically reinforces negative behaviors. Effective discipline is designed to socialize and actively teach the child important life skills. What the child needs to learn is how to regulate or manage their internal emotional states. They need to develop the skill of returning to a state of calm after a stressful experience.

The goal is to increase the child's emotional awareness and emotional management, and these are skills and competencies that can be learned and strengthened at any age. What an angry/hurt child needs most is to learn these skills of self-awareness and self-expression. The child needs reassurance that their grown-ups

understand their anger/hurt/distress and can respond in ways that comfort, soothe and relieve the pain and suffering. Active listening and empathy sends the message to the child that you are interested in understanding and alleviating their pain and suffering; an angry child is a child in pain.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

When the child is in a state of distress, anger or hyperarousal, it is imperative that the parent respond to the emotional needs of the child by providing the external regulation that is necessary for the child to return to a state of calm/regulation. Using interventions like time-outs and room time are often ineffective as they assume the child can self-regulate or self-soothe. When parents put an angry, dysregulated child in isolation, it most often reinforces the child's belief that they are bad and/or unlovable. In addition, it leaves the child alone with intense and overwhelming thoughts and feelings.

When a parent can remain calm in the eye of the storm, and model for the child how to manage internal distress, the child learns the dance of increased emotional intelligence, which is how to think before one reacts. The goal here would be to increase the child's ability to return to a state of calm after a dysregulating event, so the parent would use a time-in, where the parent provides the external structure the child needs to return to a state of calm. The parent would remove the child from the stimulating environment and proceed to down-regulate the child. With a small child this would involve rocking, singing, deep pressure rubs down the spine. With an older child it might involve taking a walk together, exercising, listening to music or using expressive arts.

For children in care, the grief process includes anger. Giving children permission to feel their feelings and validate their pain, loss and trauma allows them to process and heal. Teaching them over time how to cope with and manage their intense feelings is critical. They need to learn healthy ways to express their angry, hurt and painful feelings.

Each night at the dinner table have all family members share: "Today I felt happy when \_\_\_\_." "Today I felt sad when \_\_\_\_." "Today I felt angry when \_\_\_\_." Learning to identify and label feelings is easier in calmer moments.

### **Emotional Relearning**

One of the biggest problems for many children in foster care is that they have not experienced enough pleasure. The first five years of life are supposed to be filled with pleasure, fun and play. In fact, play is the language of children. Giving and receiving pleasure is one of the most important things the child learns in the early parent and child relationship. Human connections are supposed to be pleasurable, but what if the child has not learned this, and subsequently does not know the give and take of social-emotional relationships? What if the child is stuck in chronic states of distress and anger, and does not know how to pull him or herself out of this emotional distress?

Each time you play with the child, you replace distress and anger with pleasure, frustration with laughter, and isolation with connectedness. In addition, you will provide the child with the experiences that he or she needs to strengthen emotional and social development. The child will learn good impulse control when playing a board game where he or

she is required to take turns. The child will learn how to think in a more organized way when playing structured games that have a beginning, middle and end. They will learn how to express their feelings with words when they play "feelings charades." They will learn how to be sensitive to other people's emotional needs and cues as they socially interact through play.

Yes, it is true that children in care have been negatively impacted by abuse, neglect and multiple placements. Children in foster care arrive in their new families with pain, fear, anger, confusion and despair. The good news is that children change, grow and heal within the context of healing relationships. Emotional relearning occurs through these relationships.

Aristotle said, "to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way" — now that is emotional intelligence. •

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