

# Anger and Grief in Children

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS



Anger is one of the most common expressions of grief, yet it is often the most mis-understood. While most people expect to see sadness and crying as expressions of grief, anger often accompanies grief as well.

Because anger is often an unexpected reaction to loss, many do not know how to react to its appearance and may become concerned that it is not “appropriate to be angry” when someone dies. Remember, that everyone grieves differently and that ALL emotions are appropriate. The actions that accompany the emotion may not always be the most helpful!

Why is anger a part of the grieving process? At whom or what would anger be directed?

Let’s explore the latter question first. When someone you love dies, you might feel angry with that person. You may become angry that the person you were expecting to spend the rest of your life with has left you. You may feel abandoned. You may have been surprised by the death and this kind of surprise often leads to feelings of anger. You may be feeling overwhelmed by all the decisions that have to be made and by the “business” of death and wish your loved one were still with you to help with these decisions. Anger does not have to be rationale to be real.

Some become angry with God or their Higher Power. They may express feelings of betrayal (“I thought I would be protected”) or abandonment (“Where was HE when we needed Him the most?!”)

Anger is often expressed towards those who were involved with the death in some manner. The EMT squad that did not respond quickly

enough, the doctor or nurse, the drunk driver, the perpetrator, the legal system, all can become targets for grief-related anger.

Sometimes anger is directed towards those who are laughing or who seemingly are having a “wonderful life”. One woman described how angry she was when she saw her neighbor’s beautiful flowers blooming on a sunny afternoon. She described feeling “left out” of the beauty of the world.

And sometimes, anger turns inward and becomes guilt.

The FINGER of BLAME points OUTWARD, towards others in an



attempt to establish cause and to fix fault. When there is nothing left to blame, however, the direction of the finger pointing changes and the FINGER OF GUILT turns

INWARD. “I should have, or could have done something.” “If only” becomes the watchword for the bereaved who may become lost in the despair of guilt and anger.



One may grow angry because there is no logical reason for whatever happened or that nothing NOW can change what happened. The sense of frustration grows until it bursts forth into full-blown rage.

Children often become angry for all the same reasons adults do. They feel frustrated and helpless in the face of enormous change and the grief that washes over them may be tinged with anger and expressed with angry words or actions.

Anger is not a primary emotion, although it is so powerful that it often feels as if it were a “First Emotion”. Think of a time when you were angry. Don’t pick something too emotional for this exercise. Thinking of this time when you were angry, can you identify any other feelings besides anger?

Anger has its birth in several other emotions that occur long before anger is born. Anger is so powerful, however, that it often overshadows these “first emotions”. Underneath anger is frustration. When you are thinking of a time when you were angry, see if you can identify what was frustrating about the situation. Often it is a sense of frustration that goes unrecognized that gives birth to anger. “If only” are the words that speak of frustration.

And, if you really think about it, you may discover that underneath the sense of frustration, you find a sense of helplessness. No one likes to feel helpless, so that feeling is often quickly converted to anger. Helplessness is a weak feeling; one without controls or power. “I should have” or “I could have” are the words that speak of helplessness.

So, underneath anger are frustration and helplessness, both very powerful emotions in their own, but neither feel very energizing or powerful. So we often convert those powerless feelings into something more powerful, more “action-oriented”-anger.

By understanding this hierarchy of anger, it is easier to see how anger “grows” and therefore, much easier to see how to help “defuse” it. Many anger management programs are designed to simply STOP the behavior and many are quite effective. But until the root of the emotion is identified, anger can only be managed, not understood, respected and channeled appropriately.



***ANGER = ENERGY***



Thinking about anger as being energy gives us an opportunity to understand its power. It is neither negative nor position energy. It does demand a great source of energy, however, to be angry.

The physiology of anger is quite simple to understand, although we will not go into any depth here. The anger response resembles the “flight or fight” response that you learned about in general science. Remember that your body doesn’t care whether you are running towards the tiger or away from it...it just knows it has to “DO SOMETHING NOW”!!!!!!!

Without your consent or control, stress hormones including adrenaline and cortisol flood your body, causing:



- ◆ Your body’s need for oxygen to increase
  - ◆ Your heart rate and blood pressure to go up
  - ◆ The blood vessels in your skin to constrict
  - ◆ Your muscles to tense
- 
- ◆ Your blood sugar level to increase
  - ◆ Your blood to have an increased tendency to clot
  - ◆ Your body’s cells to pour stored fat into the bloodstream
  - ◆ Your bowel and intestinal muscles tend to constrict

All of these physical changes can lead to increase risk of stroke, heart attack and a wide variety of physical ailments. It is important to recognize, however, that anger is a state of being, with both physical and emotional components and that anger is neither positive nor negative. Society puts a

value judgment on anger, depending upon many cultural variables. Anger, however, can be both positive and negative, in the same breath! It is up to us to establish its value.

Remember that anger is simply energy, waiting to be harnessed, used or ignored. If we can harness it and use it appropriately, great things can



happen. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers) used their “anger” (energy) to help create new laws and procedures for prosecuting drunk drivers. POMC (Parents of Murdered Children) did the same thing with their rage: changing the way perpetrators are prosecuted.

The United States was built by people who were angry at what was happening in England and they came across the Atlantic (which took lots of energy) to carve out a new world and way of doing things.

Anger can also be negative. You can probably think of more examples of destructive anger than you can of constructive anger. However, both have the human element of choice at their roots. We can choose how we feel and how we use those feelings in word and action.

This information can be given to children who are expressing their sense of helplessness, frustration and the grief of not being understood or heard in anger. Anger is not an inappropriate emotion. Its accompanying actions, may however, be less than ideal in some settings.

Therefore, helping children with their anger can be the challenge of trying to understand the nature and root cause of the anger and then finding appropriate ways to express it completely in personally non-destructive ways. It is not managing the emotion; it is understanding that anger is really like an iceberg. You usually only see the tip rising above the surface.

Discovering the depth and root cause of the anger will help develop a plan of expression and dissipation.

Remember that underneath anger is frustration and under that is a sense of helplessness. Apply this awareness to grief and you can easily begin to understand how anger becomes an expression of unresolved or unrecognized grief.

Imagine how a child might feel if a parent dies, leaving that child with a sense of abandonment and fear. Being alone can lead to feelings of helplessness which if not alleviated can grow into a sense of frustration because no one seems to understand what is really being experienced. A child who feels helpless often becomes frustrated with his situation and may lash out or act out this sense of frustration. Combine that sense of helplessness and frustration with the loss of a parent or other loved one (even a pet) and you have a perfect formula for anger as an expression of grief!

In other words, anger is often used as a MASK for GRIEF or hurt or fear. Anger is a much more powerful response than being afraid or appearing weak. No child wants to appear weak or afraid so a mask of anger becomes much more acceptable. If only more people understood that!





## HELPING A GRIEVING CHILD COPE WITH ANGER

Before helping a child change his behavior or “acting out”, it is necessary to help that child dissipate the physical aspects of anger. Remember the physiology of anger? There are all kinds of hormones running around in your body, causing an increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, etc. Physically anger feels like energy and often a child will begin to wiggle or tap a foot or his fingers on a table. Some may rock or become restless and wander about. Hitting, an increased volume and tone of voice may be noticed. A child may yell, hit, stomp or “snap back” when spoken to...all signs of increased agitation and the energy of anger.

This is NOT the time to put a child in “Time Out.” The very last thing a child can physically do is sit still! Give the child an opportunity to get moving; run around the playground or track, jump up and down, pound a piece of clay, scribble in a designated notebook (A SCRIBBLE BOOK) or simply get up and move around. Older children and teens may like to dance or engage in sports. Shoot hoops can become a wonderful “de-stressor” and give the body a chance to drain off some of the adrenaline and other hormones that race through an angry body.

So, the **FIRST STEP** in helping a grieving angry child is to **help dissipate the energy of the emotion of anger**. The handout on the next page will give you some ideas for releasing the energy of anger in personally non-destructive ways.

Helping the child identify ways to release the energy of anger is a good way to engage the child in the process of helping him. Ask the child to think of ways to release the energy in ways that will not:

- ❑ Hurt one's self or others
- ❑ Cause unplanned for damage to property or people
- ❑ Get the child in trouble

You will be working on “putting the motion back into the emotion”. The intensity of the action must match the intensity of the reaction. Sitting quietly and reading a book will NOT dissipate the energy of being helpless, frustrated and angry that your mom died! Yelling or stomping a foot or smashing some clay might help, however!



Do not be afraid of the intensity of the expression. Just keep it controlled. You can do this by helping a child focus on just one aspect of his action. If a child chooses to yell out some of his frustrations and helplessness, then help him select an appropriate place to yell and then keep it focused on the volume of noise, not the words used. In other words, a child may only yell sounds, not words. Using words can add to the hostility while making only sounds actually dissipates the energy. You will also have to help a child identify where he could yell as yelling in the hallway or in his bedroom will probably not be acceptable and will only add to his sense of helplessness and frustration by getting him further into trouble.

Let the child be creative! Building a tower of blocks and then kicking it down can relieve tension and help release the pent-up energy of anger. Pounding clay or mashing cookie dough helps. Scribbling in a designated “scribble book” (a spiral notebook), yelling on the playground, running around the track, or stomping balloons are all good ways to put the motion back into the emotion. Just remember to stay focused: if you are stomping

balloons, the child must do so quietly with no additional facial or verbal expressions.

Tearing paper (have a designated anger magazine stack) or even popping bubble wrap helps. Remember, these activities are not designed to alleviate the grief...only to release the energy of the anger so you can further explore the GRIEF reaction at a later time.



# RELEASING ANGER IN SAFE WAYS



## “PUTTING THE MOTION BACK INTO THE EMOTION”

**ANGER = ENERGY**

- ◆ **Hammers** (pound plastic toy hammers)
- ◆ **Pounding** (clay, play dough, bread dough, pillow)
- ◆ **Anger cookies** (hand mix cookie dough, bake, eat!)
- ◆ **Stomping foot** (set up a stomping circle, set timer for 1 minute. Only foot stomping allowed. No facial expressions or noise)
- ◆ **Stress Ball or simply clenching/releasing fist**
- ◆ **ANGER BOX** (line a shoebox with cotton balls, lid too. Cut a hole in one end. Insert an empty toilet paper roll. Now you can yell into your box or write down what’s troubling you, put the lid on and put it away until you can think more clearly, calmly)
- ◆ **Yelling** (silent or out loud outside)

Following completion of this, teach a calming technique/relaxation response. Put anger away or **BLOW IT OUT** for NOW.



**BUBBLE BREATHING/CALMING** (bubble wand)

BREATHE IN

BLOW OUT

Peace

Despair

Joy

Sadness

Love

Grief

Once the body has become relieved of some of its stress hormones and is “fatigued”, then it is time to sit quietly and explore the reasons *behind* the reaction. The exercise will serve as a road map for a discussion with anyone who experiences anger during the grief journey. By working through the 6-step process, insights and understanding as to the nature and causes of the anger become available.

## Identifying Your Anger



ANGER

FRUSTRATION

HELPLESSNESS

**Step 1. Write it down. “I’m angry about:**

**Step 2. Think about the sentence above and write: “I’m really frustrated about:**

**Step 3. “I feel so helpless about:**

**Step 4. Turn your helplessness into a wish. “What I’m really wishing for is”:**

**Step 5. “If I can’t have my wish, what can I do?”**

**Step 6. Turn the negative energy of anger into positive power. “Today I will”:**