

Angry Children

Understanding and Helping
Your Child Regain Control

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If you have an angry child, you have undoubtedly experienced the emotional whirlwind that often emerges to leave relational, and sometimes physical, damage behind. You are most likely worn out, confused, and looking for answers to questions like:

- “How can I restore sanity to this chaos?”
- “How can I prevent these anger storms in my child?”
- “Why does this rage seem to explode out of nowhere?”
- “Will there ever be real peace in our home, or are bickering, quarreling, and fighting going to be the norm?”

Even as you read this, you may feel as though you are walking on eggshells, afraid that at any moment your child will erupt in anger over something minor.

When anger has become a pattern in your child’s life, how can you help? You know that “man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires”; but how can you minister to your child in such a way that he learns to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19–20)?

What Is an “Angry Child”?

“Angry” is not necessarily the same as “strong-willed,” although these categories do overlap. A child can be

stubborn without being angry and aggressively defiant. Angry children go from zero to sixty when they hear the word “no” or when their desires are blocked. They have a very low frustration tolerance and easily blow up or explode. They throw tantrums consistently or display physical aggression to others. All children become angry, but these children are habitually oppositional and defiant and tend to bring chaos to family life.

Where Does Anger Come From?

Like all of our emotions, anger does not come out of nowhere (although it sometimes seems like it does). Emotions don't just happen *to* your child; they are what your child *does* or *experiences* as an expression of his heart before God. In other words, our emotions are tied to our hearts, our inner nature that is living either for God or against God in every moment. What is in our hearts toward God directly affects our emotions, our words, and our actions. Notice what God says about the way our hearts are connected to everything we think, feel, say, or do:

- “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).
- “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, mur-

der, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

- “The acts of the sinful nature [i.e. actions flowing from a heart set against God] are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like...” (Galatians 5:19–21).
- “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...” (Matthew 5:21–22). Notice that Jesus puts murder and anger in the same category—with the same punishment—because both issue from the heart.

The Bible’s emphasis on the inward origin of anger suggests that helping angry children involves more than mere anger management techniques. To solve your child’s anger problem, you must target the source of his anger: his heart.

Of course, not all anger is wrong. God’s anger is holy, just, and loving, both in motive and expression. For Christians, it’s appropriate and even necessary to experience anger about the injustices and sins that rightfully anger God. It’s possible to experience anger and not

sin (Psalm 4:4; Ephesians 4:26); but most likely, your child's anger is not honoring to God the majority of the time, either in its heart orientation ("I want what I want and you can't stop me") or its expression (tantrums, disrespectful speech, hitting).

Knowing that your child's anger comes from her heart should fill you with hope. Your child is not emotionally damaged and incapable of change. Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that all kinds of people—including children with very angry hearts—could be changed into people who love God and others.

Take the Log Out of Your Own Eye

The Bible tells us that before you help others with their sins, you have to face and repent of your own sins (Matthew 7:3–5). When your child throws a tantrum or hits a sibling in anger, she is sinning against God and is responsible to him. But to stop there would be too simplistic. The Bible also acknowledges that we *can* provoke others to anger:

- "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). Your response either stirs up anger in your child or defuses it.
- "Fathers, do not exasperate your children..." (Ephesians 6:4). This command assumes that there are things fathers (and mothers!) do that