Anger is common in children. They show their anger by pouting, back-talking, yelling or throwing temper tantrums. Fortunately, most children learn to control their tempers. But anger can be a serious problem for a child with ADD, Tourette’s Syndrome Learning Disabilities, Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Depression.

Intermittent Explosive Behavior (IEB), also called Episodic Dyscontrol Syndrome (EDS), is a disorder that causes severe anger outbursts. The patient has a very low frustration tolerance. He becomes angry for little or no cause. During an uncontrollable rage, he may destroy toys or beat up kids or parents. An episode can last over 30 minutes. Afterward, the patient is often exhausted and sleepy. He may be sad about his anger outburst or not understand why he got so mad. When he is not angry, many of these patients are calm and pleasant to be with.

Anger originates in a deep part of the brain called the limbic system. During a rage episode, the norepinephrine increases, which in turn causes the breathing rate, blood pressure, and heart rate to increase. An EEG (brain wave test), or an MRI, scan may be abnormal in children with EDS.

Rarely Episodic Dyscontrol can be caused by damage to the limbic system (like a brain tumor, a stroke or head injury). Another cause of EDS is a child born to a mother who drank excessively or took cocaine while she was pregnant with that child. Episodic Dys-control, as well as the anger associated with abuse or criminal behavior tends to run in families. Environment certainly plays a part. A child who is raised in an atmosphere of intolerance, violence and criticism is much more likely to have a violent temper.

How can parents help?

- Be consistent (every day the rules are the same). Write down three to five rules that the parents agree to (such as hitting, no cussing, or no drugs). Be firm but fair.

- Ignore his temper outbursts, if at all possible. But let him know you do not approve of his rage attacks. If you see him getting frustrated, distract him before he gets mad. Suggest going outside, playing a game, watching a video, having a snack, etc.

- When the patient is out of control, send him to a quiet place where he can cool down. After the tantrum is over then talk about why he got upset and what can be done about it. Yelling when he is in a rage attack does no good.

- Avoid spankings. Spankings only make a child with Episodic Dyscontrol more angry. And it teaches the child that you can hit when you get mad. Use restrictions and time outs instead.

- Stay calm! If your child destroys things during a rage attack, then they must "pay-back" with money, chores (like cleaning their brother's room), or writing an "I'm sorry" letter.

- Censure your child's TV, video games, books, and music. Children that are raised on violent music and video games tend to be more violent and angry. Watching violence may teach them that violence is a normal way to solve our problems.

- Love, understanding and honest praise is critical. Catch him being good and praise him for it. Increase one-on-one time with your child. Listen to your child's problems and concerns. Show your child that you can control your temper.
Information for kids

It is not wrong to be angry. But ask yourself: Is this really something to get mad about? Will getting mad fix the problem? If the answer is no, then yell at yourself: “STOP.” Laugh at yourself. Think of a funny joke or story.

Walk away. Bite your tongue to keep your mouth shut. As Thomas Jefferson said, “Count to 10, if very angry, count to 100.” Squeeze your fist or an exercise ball. Find something to hit like a punching bag, or a bean bag. Use a tennis racket to hit a ball against a wall. Have a block of wood with nails in it, then when you’re mad, hammer the nails into that block of wood. Chop wood, dig a hole, play the piano, shoot some baskets, take a hot bath, spend some time with a pet dog or cat. Try anything to get your mind off what makes you mad.

Listen. “The reason we have two ears and one mouth is be cause we are suppose to listen more and talk less!” Try to understand a parent’s, friend’s and sister's point of view.

Meditate: Practice 10 minutes every day breathing deeply through your nose counting to 10. Then breath out through your mouth counting to 10. Concentrate only on your breathing. Feel yourself relaxing. Then when you start to get mad, start your deep breathing exercise. To help, try focusing on a picture or clock in the room.

Eat a good breakfast. Get at least eight hours of sleep every night. Avoid caffeine, cigarettes and drugs (especially cocaine and anabolic steroids). Don't drink alcohol. Alcohol is the No.1 preventable cause of rage attacks.

Do aerobic exercise for 20 minutes, three to five times a week. This includes walking, running, swimming laps, bicycling. Football and base ball aren't really aerobic exercises. Regular exercise helps to control your temper.

Keep a journal: Write down what made you angry, where you were, when, who was there, what you were thinking, what actions you took and how you would act in the future in similar situations.

Avoid stress

Be positive. Say to yourself, “I can.” Don’t say “I can't,” “it never works,” “I'm stupid,” or “his is dumb.” If a toy frustrates you, try to figure it out. Read the directions! Ask others for help. Trust others. Have a friend you can talk to. Being positive will help you to feel less angry.

Get organized. The more your life is organized, the less frustrated you’ll be. You won't lose your homework, tapes, or keys. Set out your clothes the night before. Write on a posted calendar all important appointments.

Don’t wait until the last minute. Don't put things off. When you get into a rush you'll probably forget something and get mad because you can't find it. Arrive early for an appointment. Do your homework, book reports, & chores now. Putting them off just makes you (and your parents) more frustrated and angry.

To forgive is divine: Try to forgive those who make you mad. Let go of your anger. Staying angry only makes you more frustrated and angry. Never go to sleep mad.

Other thoughts

Family and child counseling will help the family deal with anger and learn effective parenting skills for dealing with angry children. Join a support group.

Medication can help many children control their anger. Commonly used medicines include Tegretol, Depakote, Lamictal Pamelor, and Risperdal.

Suggested Reading

Anger Kills: Seventeen Strategies for Controlling the Hostility That Can Harm Your Health by Redford Williams

Healthy Anger: How to Help Children and Teens Manage Their Anger by Bernard Golden, PhD

The Angry Child: Regaining Control When Your Child Is Out of Control by Timothy Murphy, PhD.

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