

## From the Health Clinic



Mrs. Maureen Earner ([mearner@stambroseschool.org](mailto:mearner@stambroseschool.org))



Managing children can be a challenge. Keeping the peace while keeping your cool may seem impossible at times. But whether you are reacting to an occasional temper flare-up or a pattern of outbursts, managing your own anger when things get heated will make it easier to teach children to do the same.

To help tame a temper, try to be your child's ally – you are both rooting for your child to triumph over the temper that keeps leading to trouble.

While your own patience may be frayed by angry outbursts, opposition, defiance, arguing, and talking back, it is during these episodes that you need your patience most. Of course you feel angry, but what counts is how you handle that.

Reacting to children's meltdowns with yelling and outbursts of your own will only teach them to do the same (and actually is associated with an increase in children's

negative behaviors). But keeping your cool and calmly working through a frustrating situation lets you show - and teach - appropriate ways to handle anger and frustration.

Let us say you hear your children fighting over a toy in the other room. You have ignored it, hoping that they would work it out themselves. But the arguing turns into screaming and soon you hear doors slamming, the thump of hitting, and crying. You decide to get involved before someone gets really hurt.

By the time you arrive at the scene of the fight, you may be at the end of your own rope. After all, the sound of screaming is upsetting, and you may be frustrated that your kids aren't sharing or trying to get along. (And you know that this toy they are fighting over is going to be lost, broken, or ignored before long anyway!)

The best way for you to react is with your own self-control intact. Teaching by example is your most powerful tool. Speak calmly, clearly, and firmly - not with anger, blame, harsh criticisms, threats, or putdowns.

Of course, that is easier said than done. But remember that you are trying to teach your children how to handle anger. If you yell or threaten, you will model and ingrain the exact kinds of behavior you want to discourage. Your children will see that you're so angry and unable to control your own temper that you can't help but scream — and that won't help them learn not to scream.

## **What You Can Do**

Regulating emotions and managing behavior are skills that develop slowly over time during childhood. Just like any other skills, your kids will need to learn and practice them, with your help.

If it's unusual for your child to have a tantrum, when one does happen, clearly but calmly review the rules. Saying something like "I know you're upset, but no yelling and no name-calling, please" might be all your child needs to hear to regain composure. Then patiently give an instruction, like "tell me what you're upset about" or "please apologize to your brother for calling him that name." In this way, you're guiding your child back to acceptable behavior and encouraging self-control.

Also, tell your child what will happen if he or she doesn't calm down — for example, "If you don't calm down, you need to go to your room until you're able to stop screaming."

Kids whose temper outbursts are routine might lack the self-control necessary to deal with frustration and anger and need more help managing those emotions. These steps can help:

**Help kids put it into words.** If your child is in the middle of an outburst, find out what's wrong. If necessary, use a time-out to get your child to settle down or remind him or her about house rules and expectations — "There's no yelling or throwing stuff; please stop that right now and cool it." Remind your child to talk to you without whining, sulking, or yelling. Once your child calms down, ask what got him or her so upset. You might say, "Use your words to tell me what's wrong and what you're mad about." This helps your child put emotions into words and figure out what, if anything, needs to be done to solve the problem. However, don't push too hard for your child to talk right then. He or she may need some time to reflect before being ready to talk.

**Listen and respond.** Once your child puts the feelings into words, it's up to you to listen and say that you understand. If your child is struggling for words, offer some help: "so that made you angry," "you must have felt frustrated," or "that must have hurt your feelings." Offer to help find an answer if there's a problem to be solved, a conflict to be mended, or an apology to be made. Many times, feeling listened to and understood is all kids need to calm down. But while acknowledging your child's feelings, make it clear that strong emotions are not an excuse for bad behavior. "I know you're mad, but it's still not OK to hit." Then tell your child some things to try instead. Some children really just need to be "heard" first.

**Create clear ground rules and stick to them.** Talk about house rules regularly so your children know what you expect of them. Be clear about what is and what is not acceptable without using threats, accusations, or putdowns. Your children will get the message if you make clear, simple statements about what is off limits and explain what you do want them to do. You might say: "There is no yelling in this house. Use your words to tell me what is upsetting you."

Here are some other good-behavior rules to try:

- In this family, we do not hit, push, or shove.
- There is no screaming allowed.

- There is no door-slamming in our house.
- There is no name calling.
- We do not say mean things in this family.
- You may not throw things or break things on purpose.

## **Coping Strategies for Children**

Children, who have learned that it is not OK to yell, hit, and throw stuff when they are upset need other strategies for calming down when they are angry. Offer some ideas to help them learn safe ways to get the anger out or to find other activities that can create a better mood.

**Take a break from the situation.** Tell your children that it is OK to walk away from a conflict to avoid an angry outburst. By moving to another part of the house or the backyard, a child can get some space and work on calming down.

**Find a way to (safely) get the anger out.** You can suggest some good ways for a child to vent. Doing a bunch of jumping jacks, dancing around the bedroom, or going outside and doing cartwheels are all good choices. Or your child can choose to write about or draw a picture of what is so upsetting.

**Learn to shift.** This one is tough for kids — and adults, too. Explain that part of calming down is moving from a really angry mood to a more in-control mood. Instead of thinking of the person or situation that caused the anger, encourage kids to think of something else to do that might bring about a better mood — like a walk around the block, a bike ride, playing a game, reading a favorite book, digging in the garden, or listening to a favorite song. Try one of these things together so you both see how doing something different can change the way a person feels.

## **Building a Strong Foundation**

Fortunately, really angry episodes don't happen too often for most kids. Those with temper troubles often have an active, strong-willed style and extra energy that needs to be discharged.

Try these steps during the calm times — they can prevent problems before they start by helping kids learn and practice skills needed to manage the heat of the moment:

**Make sure kids get enough sleep.** Sleep is very important to their well-being. The link between a lack of sleep and a child's behavior isn't always obvious. When adults are tired, they can be grumpy or have low energy, but kids can become hyper or disagreeable or have extremes in behavior.

Most kids' sleep requirements fall within a predictable range of hours based on their age, but each child is a unique individual with distinct sleep needs.

**Help them label emotions.** Help kids get in the habit of saying what they're feeling and why — for example, "I'm mad because I have to clean my room while my friends are playing." Using words doesn't get a child out of doing a chore, but having the discussion can calm the situation. You're having a conversation instead of an argument. Praise your child for talking about it instead of slamming the door, for instance.

**See that kids get a lot of physical activity.** Active play can really help kids who have big tempers. Encourage outside play and sports your child likes. Karate, wrestling, and running can be especially good for kids who are trying to get their tempers under control. But any activity that gets the heart pumping can help burn off energy and stress.

**Encourage kids to take control.** Compare a temper to a puppy that hasn't yet learned to behave and that's running around all over the place getting into things. Puppies might not mean to be bad — but they need to be trained so that they can learn that there's no eating shoes, no jumping on people or certain furniture, etc. The point is that your child's temper - like a puppy - needs to be trained to learn when it is OK to play, how to use all that extra energy, and how to follow rules.

**Recognize successes.** Many times these go unnoticed so be sure to comment on how well your child handled a difficult situation when you see positive behaviors.

**Try to be flexible.** Parenting can be a tiring experience, but try not to be too rigid. Hearing a constant chorus of "no" can be disheartening for children. Sometimes, of course, "no" is absolutely the only answer - "no, you cannot ride your bike without your helmet!" But other times, you might let the children win one. For instance, if your child wants to keep the wiffle ball game going a little longer, maybe give it 15 more minutes.

Try to identify "at-risk" situations and be proactive. For example, if your child has difficulty with transitions, give warnings ahead of time. Similarly, if your children have trouble turning off the television when asked, be clear how long they can watch TV or play video games and then set a 5-minute warning timer. Be sure to enforce the agreement.

As anyone who has been really angry knows, following sensible advice can be tough when emotions run high. Give your children responsibility for getting under control, but be there to remind them how to do it.

Most children can learn to get better at handling anger and frustration. But if your child often gets into fights and arguments with friends, siblings, and adults, additional help might be needed.