



ANGRY KIDS

DEALING WITH EXPLOSIVE BEHAVIOUR

PREPARED BY DR. KATE AUBREY, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Dealing with an angry child can be one of the most frustrating parts of parenting. Many parents report being surprised, hurt and stressed by the defiant and angry behaviours of their children. Most children have occasional tantrums or meltdowns. They may sometimes lash out if they're frustrated or be defiant if asked to do something they don't want to do. But when kids do these things repeatedly, or can't control their tempers a lot of the time, it may be a more serious or chronic problem. Dr. Aubrey refers to these behaviours as **explosive** because they often come without warning, intensify rapidly, and persist for increased periods of time.

Here are some signs of explosive behaviour:

- If your child's tantrums and outbursts are occurring past the age in which they're developmentally expected (up to about 7 or 8 years old)
- If his behaviour is dangerous to himself or others
- If her behaviour is causing her serious trouble at school, with teachers reporting that she is out of control
- If his behaviour is interfering with his ability to get along with other kids, so he's excluded from play dates and birthday parties
- If her tantrums and defiance are causing a lot of conflict at home and disrupting family life
- If he's upset because he feels he can't control his anger, and that makes him feel bad about himself
- If you feel like you are walking on eggshells trying not to set off an explosion

As a parent, one of the most difficult things you have to do is manage your child's behaviour when they are in an angry, volatile mood. I recommend that you create a **"Rage Plan"** to help you handle your child's behaviour. The following 5 steps are the basis of this plan:

1. Make sure the area around your child is safe. Make sure that the area your child is in is safe and that no one can be hurt if and when he lashes out. Remove yourself and any siblings from the area. If he will go to his room, send him there. Reduce any stimulation in his vicinity. Turn off the TV, lower the lights, take the phone away. The idea is to let your child wear himself out.

2. Try to get calm: Even if emotions are running high, work to calm yourself down. Talk to your child in an even tone of voice. Tell her that her behaviour is unacceptable and that you'll speak with her when he's calmed down. Model good behaviour for your child. Remember, kids learn from their parents, which is another reason you want to remain calm. You're teaching her appropriate ways to manage stressful situations.

3. Don't respond to name-calling or verbal abuse. If your child is screaming things at you, calling you names, or saying you're "I hate you," do not respond to it. Simply leave the room or send him to his bedroom. Don't yell back at your child because it will bring you into his rage and make you the focal point of his anger.

4. Talk later, when you're both calm: The time to talk is when you and your child are both calm. If she's yelling in her room, she should not be getting your attention, period. Though it seems like you're ignoring the behaviour in some ways, later you will definitely want to let your child know that her behaviour is not acceptable. Tell her there are better ways to deal with anger than losing control. You might also have your child make amends if she broke something or hurt someone else. If your child is very young, you may want her to draw a picture that says, "I'm sorry." If your child is older, you want to ask her to do something more meaningful for the person she wronged.

5. Give consequences for behaviour, not the anger: Never give consequences for the feeling of anger—focus on the angry behaviour instead. It's important to give your child the message that it's okay to feel angry. If your child is screaming and yelling but not breaking anything or hurting anyone, there would be no reason to give consequences.

If your child has just begun to lash out in rage when angered, it's likely that these five steps are going to work fairly well—especially after you go through them a few times. Your calm, matter of fact response is going to teach him that explosive anger is not the way to deal with his frustration. If the behaviour has been going on for a long time and it's more ingrained, however, prepare to go through these five steps repeatedly until your child knows that you mean it.

Long-standing Rage

Some children's rage is long-standing—that is, they've been engaging in this type of behaviour repeatedly, sometimes for years. This is when you need to learn about your child's triggers. Once your child has calmed down, talk with him about his explosion. Ask, "What happened before you blew up today?" If your child comes home angry after school in a volatile mood, you might have to call his teacher and find out if there was a problem that day. Ask specific questions like, "Was my child picked on? Did he do poorly on an assignment? Was he disciplined in class?" But remember, even if your child had a terrible day at school, it doesn't excuse his behaviour at home. After all, there are other ways to deal with having a bad day than by calling his siblings foul names, screaming in your face or kicking a table over.

Many parents of oppositional, defiant kids walk around on eggshells around their children, trying not to upset them. Although it is understandable why you would get into that habit, remember, your child isn't learning to behave differently when you do this. In fact, by getting you to tiptoe around him, he's teaching *you* to behave differently—he's training you to anticipate his angry outbursts. So instead, do the things that you would normally do—don't alter your behaviour to suit your child's moods. And again, have that rage plan and respond to your child's behaviour accordingly.

When you talk to your child about his triggers, always ask, "How are you going to handle this differently *next time*?" That's the real purpose of looking at triggers—to help your child better understand them so he learns to respond differently the *next time* he gets angry or frustrated. The most important thing to remember is that helping your child deal with his anger now will help him manage these feelings later on in his life.

You Can't Talk Your Child Out of His Rage

Keep in mind that you should never try to talk to your child in the middle of a rage or tantrum. Any attempt to respond to him at that point will just wind him up and reinforce his anger. Additionally, your child is not listening very well at that time. Your attempts to reason with him, lecture or talk to your child about the issue at hand aren't going to sink in if he's in the middle of a rage.

Instead, give short, clear, calm directions. Say, "This is not Okay. You need to go to your room until you can get it together." If you have screamed back in the past or reacted angrily to your child, keep a calm voice. If this is a challenge for you, try practicing what you will say ahead of time.

Destructive Behaviour

With some kids, their explosive anger escalates until it becomes destructive. If your child breaks his own things during one of his rages, he should suffer the natural consequences of losing those items—or he should be made to replace them with his own money. Even a young child can help with the dishes or do chores around the house to earn things back. If your child is older, he can pay you back with his allowance or money from his part-time job. This is a great lesson because your child will clearly see that his behaviour caused the problem: He threw his iPod against the wall—now he doesn't have one.

Let me add that if your teenager is breaking *your* things or being very destructive in your house—threatening you, punching holes in the walls, kicking in doors—this is another matter entirely. If your child is doing significant damage when he loses his temper, or if you're feeling unsafe, I recommend that parents call someone in, like the police. Look at it this way: If you don't do anything to protect yourself, other family members, or your home, what's the message that's being sent to your child? He will learn that he's in complete control—and that the best way to get what he wants is to be destructive.

If your child or teen has developed a pattern that includes breaking things, part of your plan would be saying to him ahead of time, "If this happens again and I feel unsafe, I'm going to have to call for help. I'm going to ask Dad to come in, call the neighbours, or the police."

Does My Child Have a Mental Health Problem?

If at any point you feel like your child's behaviour is beyond a normal temper tantrum, or if you really can't hang in there any longer as a parent, be sure to seek the help of a professional.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is a mental health condition where a child struggles with a frequent and persistent pattern of anger, irritability, arguing, defiance or vindictiveness toward you and other authority figures. Your psychologist can complete an assessment to figure out if your child meets criteria for ODD.

Here are some times when you should seek a professional opinion:

- If your child doesn't respond even though you are consistent with your plan of action.
- If your child's trigger doesn't seem to be rational or make sense.
- If your child appears to struggle to cope with everyday expectations.