Should I be Worried?

Understanding My Child’s Anger

“He is usually a caring and sensitive child, but when he explodes in rage he is like a monster.” The frustrated mother was describing her 8-year old son, Michael, a second grader who is liked by his teachers and his classmates – except when he has a “meltdown”.

Michael is typical of children who display a pattern of impulsive-reactive aggression (IRA). These children acquire various diagnostic labels when they are evaluated by mental health professionals – ADHD, Oppositional/Defiant Disorder, or Disruptive Behavior Disorder. However, as Ross Greene (2005) explains, regardless of diagnostic labeling, the two primary features shared by children with IRA are low frustration tolerance and inflexibility. These children are not exhibiting a character flaw or a moral weakness, but simply manifesting subtle neurodevelopmental deficits related to difficulties in emotion and impulse regulation. They tend to be overwhelmed by their strong emotions and often experience emotion in an all-or-none manner, either feeling nothing at all, or experiencing anger as red-hot rage – with nothing between. In other words, they have not developed the capacity for modulation. Greene (2005) advocates an active teaching approach called collaborative problem-solving (CPS). The goal is to teach parents to help kids to develop skills to manage their emotions and impulses more consistently, skills they presently lack. In CPS, problem solving skills and crucial social skills of compromise, negotiation, and empathy are modeled, rehearsed, and reinforced. This article discusses ways in which parents, teachers, and other caretakers, including play therapists, can assist children to deal with IRA.
Anger Modulation
Children who develop the capacity to identify, label and verbalize their feelings are more capable of modulating emotions. Even highly verbal children can have a limited vocabulary when it comes to intense emotional states. As a respected colleague explained, aggressive children tend to experience emotion “like a wind blowing through their system.” Because their feeling states are non-descriptive and undifferentiated, they are unable to identify or share them. One of the most effective interventions for a child who explodes in rage is to teach her/him an expanded vocabulary for dealing with feelings. The vocabulary should include not just “angry” and “mad”, but words that capture the various levels of intensity – such as “irritated”, “annoyed”, “furious”, and “enraged”. For children who do not know how to modulate their anger, teaching them a vocabulary that expresses degrees of intensity helps them understand that emotions do not have to be experienced in an all-or-none way.

Kids can also express the degree of their anger or rage through artistic or symbolic depiction; for example, draw a volcano or monster that shows how angry they were on a given occasion or how angry they were at a specific person. By artistic expression they will express different levels and degrees of intensity of the volcano erupting or the angry monster raging that is helpful in reinforcing the concept of different levels or grades of intensity.

Another way to convey this concept is to hand children a foam ball and ask them to throw the ball to the floor with the same force as their angry feelings. It is often helpful to demonstrate this to the child the first time it is used, explaining that, in the case of minor annoyance or irritation, they would throw the ball softly and then demonstrate. As anger increases the adult demonstrates harder slams of the ball to the floor. The child is then asked to show how angry she/he felt by throwing the ball to the floor according to the intensity of the feelings. The child can also be asked to use words to describe the intensity of his/her feelings before throwing the ball to the floor

Anger Thermometer
Still another technique that parents and teachers can use is an “anger thermometer.” Children can be helped to find words to express low level (blue zone), mid level (yellow zone), and high level (red zone) anger. In addition to finding words to express anger in each zone, children can be taught crucial problem-solving skills. They can be asked, what choices they might have for expressing anger if they are only irritated or annoyed. If children don’t notice the signs of anger until it is too late (in the red zone), their choices will be limited. When they reach meltdown point they are unable to reason or to think clearly, and all the parent or teacher may be able to do is to try to keep them safe. It is helpful to focus kids on the early signs of anger build-up. Do they notice their voices rising, their hearts racing, and the clenching of their teeth or fists? The earlier these signs are noticed, the more likely it is that they will be able to head off a meltdown. Since a sense of personal control is important to children, it can
be helpful to talk about early detection skills as ways they can take charge of their anger. Self-calming skills often cited by children as helpful are: (1) walk away; (2) use distraction to get your mind off it; (3) count to ten; (4) take three deep breaths; (5) use coping statements, like, “I can handle this,” or “I am in control here”; (6) use rationalization statements, like, “I didn’t want to go to the party anyway”; and (7) displacement into physical activities like a vigorous game of basketball with friends.

Teaching Empathy
Empathy is arguably the most important of all pro-social skills. It plays a crucial role in preventing or breaking the cycle of violence; and it’s development needs “seeding,” stimulation, and encouragement. The ability to fully appreciate and understand the perspective of another person doesn’t develop until adolescence; however it is not uncommon to observe a toddler comforting another child. This is the beginning stage of empathy, demonstrating it is never too early to model, encourage, teach, highlight, and reinforce empathy.

Elizabeth’s mother received a call from the mother of one of Elizabeth’s third grade classmates, Nicole. Nicole’s mother was quite upset as she relayed what Nicole had reluctantly revealed to her. Nicole’s mother said Elizabeth had organized a group of girls to shun Nicole at school. The four girls had not spoken to Nicole during the past week. Nicole was distraught and did not understand why Elizabeth did this. How should Elizabeth’s parents respond to her hurtful actions toward her classmate? They would want to understand the situation from Elizabeth’s perspective before intervening. Assuming Elizabeth did what Nicole’s mother said, they would likely consider various negative consequences. They could send her to bed early or require her to stay in her room after dinner for a week without TV. They could also require her to write a letter of apology. Of these options the apology is the one most likely to be beneficial to all concerned; but there is an important missing step. Before asking Elizabeth to write any letters of apology it is essential that the parents insist that Elizabeth consider carefully, on both a cognitive as well as emotional level, what was wrong with what she did. More importantly they should stress that she try to put herself in Nicole’s place, appreciate what that would be like, and how she would feel. The emphasis is on showing empathy for Nicole. This requirement could be easily tied to any imposed consequence such as, “We want you to go to your room and stay there until you can convince us that you truly understand what Nicole experienced, thought and felt as a result of your actions.” This is done not in a punitive spirit but as a genuine wish on the part of the parents to facilitate the development of empathy in Elizabeth.

If, like many young children, Elizabeth is eager to have her restrictions lifted and approaches the task hastily and without careful thought or sensitivity; the parents would be well advised to send Elizabeth back to her room to think more carefully and deeply about what Nicole experienced. Any apology will be more meaningful if Elizabeth has been required to do her empathic groundwork. Of course, parents will need to be realistic. An 8-year old child will not typically be able to express the same degree of empathy as a teen, but the child should...
be expected to go as far as possible in empathic understanding of the other child’s hurt. Research has shown that families that stress empathy in children in the early elementary school years are rewarded when those same children become socially better adjusted teens more capable of empathy.

**What about Guilt?**

Parents may worry that the above approach might leave their child feeling guilty. Guilt is a pro-social and constructive response to an act that has hurt another person. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that guilt, as defined by condemnation of a specific act, is correlated with pro-social behavior, empathy and social acceptance; while shame, defined as condemnation of self, is a destructive emotion associated with a wide range of social and emotional maladjustment (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This research has important implications for following up aggressive acts of children. A child’s feeling of guilt as a result of an act that has hurt another, should be regarded as a positive and hopeful sign and the child’s feeling should be validated. (“It feels bad when you do something that hurts one of your classmates.”) If the child feels shame and is self-condemning, this should be vigorously challenged. (“What you did to Johnny was wrong and it hurt him and I know you feel badly about it, but you are no way a bad kid.”)

Perhaps the most effective way to help children develop constructive ways to express anger is to set a good example. If a teacher or parent is frequently yelling, it will be hard to motivate kids to work on their own anger-management. If we model remaining calm even when under stress and demonstrate that there are constructive ways to cope with the inevitable frustrations that arise in daily life; children will want to imitate such behaviors and, eventually if they are attached to us, will internalize adaptive coping behaviors.

We need to be careful about the way we think and talk about anger in children. Even the most furious, enraged child is not angry all the time. Some children are angry at home, but not at school – or vice versa. Some kids only become aggressive if they are humiliated. If we think of kids as monsters or demons, they have an uncanny way of living up to our expectations. It is helpful to identify the triggers and the specific contexts that lead to meltdowns and then help the child be aware of them and ways to cope when provocations are unavoidable. If the child’s rage poses a risk to others or to self, an evaluation by a licensed mental health professional, experienced in problems of aggression in children, is recommended.

**References**