



Parents Partner

TUTORIAL Understanding the aggressive/defiant child

Do parents, or teachers always like their child's behaviour? Few kids are the model of perfection (I haven't met any yet, but there may be one or two!) and kids do things that disappoint or displease us. Sometimes they can behave in ways that really annoy us; the angry, defiant child is a good example. How do you change an angry, aggressive child into a cooperative child?

Firstly, anger is not a behaviour; it's an emotion. We might encounter the anger through the child's behaviour, but the cause of the behaviour is always emotional. It makes sense then that **to change the behaviour you have to first change the emotion**. As parents/teachers we need to hear the feelings of fear, despair or danger that the anger hides, because only when a child feels safe can they think clearly and behave properly. It's really important to understand this insight because it's focusing on the emotion, not the behaviour, where success will be found. When a child is upset they can't be influenced by reason ("You shouldn't be angry; anger is bad!") An angry child is an aroused child and aroused children can only listen when they are soothed.

What is anger and where does it come from?

Anger is usually a response to a hurt. When any person - young or older - feels violated they feel angry. The young child who now has to share dad and mums time with new baby sister feels violated. The child who wants dad or mums time and attention, but they are always working or preoccupied feels violated. When parents separate it's usual for a child to experience feelings of violation ("I expected dad and mum to live with me in the same house, now dad's gone; I feel violated!")

Young children find it difficult to say how they feel, especially anger. Strong emotions are confusing to a young child. But every child wants you to know how they are feeling without having to tell you. To tell you they use their behaviour. When a child can't use words to describe how they feel but use their behaviour it's called acting out. The aggressive and defiant child is acting out. The parent/teacher has to get below the behaviour to understand the emotion that is causing the behaviour. Only then will the aggressive behaviour change. Parents are often very uncomfortable with anger in their child. Most of us would like to suppress our child's anger and express ours! But anger is healthy and a normal part of a child's development. It's a way to protect the child from harm or anticipated danger.

A scientific insight

The following sounds rather scientific, but it explains why a child gets angry and also provides a window of possibility into how to change the anger.

All human brains are constantly scanning the environment to detect any threats to our safety - it happens at an unconscious level. If our brain thinks there is a threat it releases a hormone - cortisol - into

the blood stream causing a **fight or flight** response; this is a defence reaction. It's a good system when we face real threats as it enables us to survive. But sometimes the system gets triggered, or activated when there is no real threat present. That's because the brain stores memories and if there has been past hurt it can interpret a present situation as being similar - so the defence system gets activated.

This is what is happening in an angry child's brain. From their past experience (and maybe present) the child feels threatened, which then causes a release of these defence hormones to flood their body system causing a fight or flight reaction - although in the case of an angry child it is a fight reaction. Their anger and defiance, which is being expressed through aggressive behaviour, is caused by these fight hormones.

It's important to understand this because that's why behavioural techniques have little effect on changing their aggressive behaviour. It's not that what the teachers/parent do is wrong - not at all. But for this child the angry behaviour is being driven by hormones!! To stop the aggression you have to help the child switch off the hormones and switch on their safety system that overrides the fight or flight system. That's the important insight. This child isn't naughty, though they are doing some harmful behaviour - they feel threatened which is causing a fight response. Something in their brain is telling them that their world is unsafe, so they go into defence mode - fight!

The treatment focus then becomes: how do we turn off their defence system so they feel safe? Once they feel safe their body will no longer produce these "fight" hormones. When a child feels safe they are calm and socially engaged with others in positive ways.

When a parent hears this scientific insight it can cause some anxiety: what possibly could be causing my child to feel threatened? Ours is a loving and involved home, we love our child, he/she is the centre of our life, we are good parents, etc.. In some cases kids emotional needs are being ignored, but in most cases parents are engaged with their child. Trouble is though not every child feels engaged with their parent. Little things can trigger this defence system within a child, like over commitment with work, being physically present with your child, but not emotional present i.e. on the phone, the web, TV etc.. If a child is feeling vulnerable any distraction can activate their defence system. Even your tone of voice can trigger it!

There are numerous explanations of how a good parent can have a child who feels threatened. It's futile to try to find a culprit: "*Who has messed up here!*" The real point is to recognise your child feels unsafe, and to proactively get involved to turn off their defence system and activate their safe system. No one is in a better position to help a child feel safe than dad and mum. What follows is how to do this.

What to do about it

I recommend four interventions: the first two for teachers and parents; the last two for parents only.

Step One	Put a boundary to prevent the child from hurting other kids, or causing disruption. No doubt you are doing this already, so keep doing it. Every time the child does an aggressive act - throwing toys, yelling, give them a firm command " <i>No Throwing! No yelling!</i> " And if they act aggressively the parent or teacher should supply the word for how the child is feeling - angry: " <i>I know you feel <u>angry</u>, but you are not to throw things.</i> "
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Step Two

Switch off their defence system, so it isn't receiving stress hormones. Here is how teachers/parents can override the child's defence system and turn on their safety system. I'm going to describe what a teacher should do, but it equally applies to parents.

1. To form secure bonds humans need **face to face** contact. If there is a teacher who relates better to the child, have her intentionally spend time **every hour** for 5 minutes in face to face contact with the child. It must not be side by side play, reading a story, etc. It must be face to face so the child can see her face clearly. When engaged with the child face to face the teacher must do 3 things:
 - Smile so her eyes have 'crows feet.' This just means there is crinkled skin at the side of the eyes!! Relax, it happens automatically when you smile. Interestingly, recent research has found that when people have botox treatment other people can't interpret how they are feeling. It changes the contour of the eyes. Neat eh!
 - Have an uplifted mouth - which again occurs automatically when you smile. When you are unhappy the mouth droops. You want the child's brain to recognise through your facial expressions that it is a safe world.
 - As the teacher/parent talks with the child be conscious of lifting your eye brows. This sounds silly, but it is very powerful at triggering a child's safety system in their brain. Have someone talk to you with their eye brows lowered, then have them talk with their eye brows raised - you can feel a physical difference in your body! So does the child.

When the brain receives these three non verbal messages it says, "**This is safe.**" And when it's safe there is no need for those stress hormones . . .

2. Be physically close to child at intentional times. It's not possible all the time, but have the teacher create moments when she is touching the child.
3. Voices are powerful calming agents. This child needs to hear **low and slow** communication to trigger their inner ear. Often with a child like this their inner ear muscles shut down. To activate them again eliminate background noise - take him/her aside, outside, away from the noise - and speak to him/her in a gentle, slow and low voice. For parents at home turn off the TV, or radio so your child can hear your voice clearly without having to yell. It works like magic! Voice is highly important for calming a child. Don't yell at any child, but especially an angry one. A loud high voice activates the danger system. Low and slow is the secret.

Step Three - for parents	<p>Parents check out your child's environment</p> <p>Too much wrong stimuli in your child's environment can give them emotional overload, thus triggering their defence system. There are three assessments here:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are they watching inappropriate media - TV, DVD, Computer games? Inappropriate is violence, sex and rapid action. These arouse a child's system causing a sense of danger. 2. Are they watching too much media. Too much is more than an hour a day. Media is structured to excite and provoke the brains sensory systems. That's why we like watching it because it's not boring. But too much for a young child triggers their fight or flight response. Only an hour a day. 3. Check your child's diet. Are they getting too much sugar as it will hype up their system.
Step Four - for parents	<p>Check your stress levels as a parent</p> <p>If you are stressed, or anxious threat messages will be transferred to your child through your body language and tone of voice. Kids quickly pick up if a parent is stressed. A little bit of stress is healthy . . . But too much conveys a message of danger to your child. If you find yourself shouting at your child there is a good chance you are feeling stressed from things other than your child - work, partner, finances, etc.</p> <p>As a parent, check your arousal levels, and if they are high, lower them. Beginning with YOU is a great place to start to calm an angry child!</p>

With this intervention I would expect the anger to stop within ten days, or sooner. The above interventions are an empathetic response that mirrors to a child that their upset feelings are normal and understandable. When a child feels dad and mum (or teacher) accept their deep feelings as being a normal part of human experience they amazingly transform their own angry emotions into calm, co-operative ones. It works the same way for adults too.

If you don't see a change in two weeks contact me.

SUMMARY OF INTERVENTION

Parents and Teachers	Parents
1. Have face to face time with him/her	A. Is my child watching inappropriate media?
2. Smile	B. Is my child watching too much media?
3. Raise your eye brow when talking with him/her	C. Is my child consuming too much sugar?
4. Touch him/her	D. Am I currently experiencing a lot of stress and anxiety?
5. Use a low and slow voice with no background noise	

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