

Dear Parents

One of the most impressive things to behold is a young boy having a tantrum. The emotional energy on display is amazing to behold and, as the adult, there is not much you can do at the time except try and protect him (and the odd toy, sister etc) from physical harm.

Anger is one of the most important things to teach our children to handle properly as they grow up. There is a tendency to view anger as negative, especially with regard to young people, but it is not in itself negative. In fact it is usually the correct, or at least an understandable, response to the situation which has caused it. Anger's bad press comes because too often the behaviour around it is inappropriate and/or the adult's response to this display of anger is not wise. When children are not taught how to express their anger in appropriate ways all sorts of problems occur both during childhood and into adulthood.

The childish tantrum is the one extreme reaction to anger and the fact that we tend to associate them with very young children shows that we do expect them to learn that such a response is not appropriate. Like other behaviours that are learnt, this does not happen all at once and so we should not be surprised when young people respond to their anger in ways which is not entirely acceptable to adults. Each time it happens it is an opportunity to teach.

The other extreme is for a child not to respond outwardly to his feelings of anger but to repress them. He may do this for a number of reasons but usually it is because he has learnt that his outward expression of anger results in an angry response from significant adults in his life. Sadly anger cannot be repressed – it simply works itself out in some other, less obvious, way. And so we see boys being rebellious in big and little ways, we see marks dropping, drugs and/or alcohol being increasingly used. We see boys agitated, depressed and even suicidal. On the whole physiologists are much more concerned about passive aggression in young people, which results largely from repressed anger, than active aggression – even though it is the latter which generally results in a quicker response from authorities, including parents.

The problem with being parents is that we take into parenting a whole lot of baggage. We are not machines who will respond in just the right way to teach our children how to handle their anger. Indeed at times our reactions teach them completely inappropriate ways – especially if we are tired, stressed and/or angry with someone else (or ourselves) already. However, we need to see the importance of our response and so try and exercise such self-control and courage as to give our children the right space to be angry and learn through the experience. Once things have cooled down we can talk things through with them; Why such anger? In what ways was their response appropriate and good? In what ways was it not acceptable and you would not like to hear or see such behaviour again? If we expect adult responses from children then we will often be disappointed and may respond with indignant anger. If we see each display of anger as an opportunity for our child to grow into an adult then we will have more control over ourselves – and hence the whole scenario. The advantage of two parent families is that if one parent starts to “lose

it' the other can step in and help. It is far tougher for single parents – perhaps one of the hardest things.

I am told there are tough economic times ahead (indeed are already here for some). This could increase the tension in our homes and, maybe, our school. Perhaps more than ever we need to think on these words of Dr Ross Campbell: “When a child brings his anger to you, he is also bringing himself to be taught.”

I hope your son has a good term. All the best with your parenting! It certainly makes life interesting – which is one of the reasons we get into this condition, I suppose...

Regards  
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