

Everyday Learning Series
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About babies
toddlers and
preschoolers



Everyday learning about

managing angry feelings

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The most important early learning happens through day-to-day life experiences and the **Everyday Learning** books are about how parents and carers can make the most of these experiences. What an exciting responsibility it is to be helping build the foundations for the future of young children!

- › The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.
- › Every experience counts! Babies and young children are learning all the time, with most learning taking place in relationships.
- › Research shows that what happens in these years is the key to:
 - being able to relate confidently and effectively with others
 - mental and emotional health
 - educational success.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

What do babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning?

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- › are warm and caring

- › know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them
- › take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed
- › are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

Adults provide:

- › *responsive and sensitive care*
- › *a safe and interesting place to be.*

They follow children's lead by supporting their exploration and the things they like to do.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

Living is learning and children learn through living. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests. Follow the child's lead.

Watch and listen; provide opportunities; give support; build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences. These books will help you to provide the best start for the children in your care.

Introduction

Sara is 18 months old. Often she tries to take toys from her older brother and hits him when he won't let her have them.

Alex is three years old. When he goes shopping with his father and dad does not buy him a chocolate Alex starts to scream and kicks the shopping trolley.

Jules is four and a half years old. Gabbie was Jules' best friend at preschool until they had a fight. Since the fight Jules has been teasing Gabbie and telling other children not to play with him.

All these children are having problems managing their angry feelings. Having angry feelings or feeling aggressive is normal. All children have these feelings at some time but how each child manages these feelings will be different. Most children learn to manage their feelings in safe and acceptable ways. However, sometimes children cannot manage their feelings and need family and carers to help them learn how to do so.



'Having angry feelings or feeling aggressive is normal.'



Why do children have angry feelings?

There are many reasons for why children feel angry. These include:

- › Children do not always know what words to use so that others can understand what they want and need.
- › Children do not automatically know different ways of positively expressing anger.
- › Underlying feelings such as fear and anxiety can lead to anger.
- › Children do not always know that their angry actions and words hurt others.
- › Children see other children being angry and aggressive and can copy this.
- › Some children confuse being assertive with being aggressive.
- › Children do not always understand how their families and carers expect them to behave.
- › Anger can come from frustration about not being able or allowed to do something.
- › Anger can come from being hurt.
- › Some children grow up in environments where there is a lot of anger and copy this behaviour.



'There is no one right or wrong way of expressing angry feelings ...'

Some positive ways for children to manage angry feelings and aggression can include:

- › talking about how they feel
- › releasing energy through physical activities such as jumping a rope or running
- › hammering or pounding clay
- › painting
- › making or listening to music
- › sand and water play.

Different ways of expressing angry feelings

Angry feelings can be expressed in many different ways. Positive ways of managing anger and aggression allow children to express their feelings in acceptable, safe ways. When children express feelings in negative ways they can hurt themselves and those around them. What is considered positive or negative will vary between different families and groups. There is no one right or wrong way of expressing angry feelings and children need to learn ways that are safe and acceptable to the people around them.



When children have trouble managing their feelings in a positive way they might hit other children, kick a wall, scream uncontrollably or tease other children. Behaving like this can make children feel more frustrated and increase their anger. When children express their feelings in such negative ways, they need adults to show them positive ways of managing the feelings.



Children learn how to behave by watching and listening to the people around them. They learn quickly from the people they love, such as family and carers, so it is important that these people show children positive ways of managing angry feelings and aggression.

When children are not able to manage their feelings it can be distressing for those who care for them. Sometimes this is because people think that angry feelings and aggression are bad. Having angry feelings is normal, and learning how to manage them is important for children's healthy emotional development. It is not the feeling itself which is 'bad' but sometimes the way that the child shows the feeling is not helpful. Our role as adults is to help children manage their feelings in safe and acceptable ways so that they do not hurt themselves or others.



Babies

Unhappiness in babies

All young babies frown, cry and tense their bodies when they are uncomfortable. These are not signs of anger or aggression but rather are babies' ways of showing others that they are unhappy or distressed. Without words to tell others that they are unhappy, babies need to do this through their actions and cries. Being hungry, cold, tired or unwell are all reasons a baby might not be comfortable. It is important when young babies show signs of unhappiness and distress that adults respond and provide comfort immediately.

When babies cry it is their way of telling the adults who care for them that something is not right. Adults should not leave babies to cry. Not attending to a baby that is crying can make a baby even more distressed and anxious.

'It is important when young babies show signs of unhappiness and distress that adults respond and provide comfort immediately.'



From about 12 months of age infants begin to learn about angry feelings. However, they do not understand these feelings in the same ways as older children or adults. Without words infants still have limited ways of expressing their feelings, and it is important for adults to understand the ways their children express anger, distress and unhappiness. What some adults might think is a young baby being angry is really the baby trying to tell them that something is not right. Families and carers should take time to watch babies and learn how they use body language and sounds to tell others about what they need and feel. An understanding of the different ways babies express anger and unhappiness helps adults to respond faster and more appropriately when a baby is distressed.

Infants respond to unhappiness in the people around them. When babies see and hear anger and aggression in those who care for them it can cause them great distress. Young children often think they have done something wrong when they see their family and carers angry and upset. Research shows that it is important for the development of very young babies for them to be with people who respond quickly to their distress in a caring way.

Helping babies manage their unhappiness

Giving children words they can use to describe how they feel is very important in helping them learn to manage their angry feelings. Words also allow children to tell others what they want and need in a positive way. Even though young babies are not able to use words, adults should talk to them about feelings from an early age. This early teaching helps prepare babies to be able to use words when they are older. For instance, when a baby is tired and cries, an adult could say, 'You are upset because you are tired. I'll give you a cuddle to help you go to sleep.' Similarly, if a baby is crying because she has a sore stomach an adult could say, 'You sound sad because you feel sore. I'll give your tummy a rub to help make it feel better.' Hearing this language helps children learn the words they will later need to express their feelings in positive ways.

'Giving children words they can use to describe how they feel is very important in helping them learn to manage their angry feelings.'

When a baby is unhappy it is very important that the carer responds immediately and tries to identify what is causing the discomfort. Is the baby hungry, cold, wet, tired or ill? Responding quickly and warmly to a baby's discomfort helps to show the baby that he is loved and reduces his stress. Even if you are not able to stop the baby from crying he will be helped by you holding and comforting him. Other things carers can do to help make babies feel happy and comfortable include:

- › giving him a cuddle and holding him close
- › keeping him nearby when he is awake
- › talking quietly to him
- › playing gentle music for him
- › reading a story to him
- › avoid being angry or aggressive when around him.

Toddlers

Physical anger and aggression in toddlers

Many of the things toddlers do worry adults, and make them think the child is aggressive, but they are actually part of normal development. As children learn to better manage their bodies, use words, and understand positive ways of showing their feelings, many of the behaviours that worry families and carers disappear. Families and carers have an important role in teaching toddlers positive ways of managing their angry feelings.

'Talking to children from an early age about how their words and actions can hurt others is important ...'

When young children start to walk they are still learning how to get their arms and legs working together. This means that they often accidentally hit or bump other children as they play. Sometimes as adults we mistake this hitting and pushing as a child being angry and we worry that they are aggressive. It is normal for toddlers to go through a period where they hit and bump other children a lot. Most often they do not even know that they are hurting others. It is only with practice that children learn to walk and run and turn easily, and then bumps and hits become less.

When a child accidentally hits or pushes another child it is helpful to use it as an opportunity for teaching her about other people's feelings. An adult can tell the child that it makes her friends sad when they are hit or pushed. This helps the child learn that her actions can hurt others. Talking to children from an early age about how their words and actions can hurt others is important in teaching them how to manage their feelings.



Learning language to express angry feelings

Toddlers are still learning about language and, when they do not know what words to use, they use physical actions to tell others what they want and feel. For example, when young children play together it is common to see one child snatch a toy from another. Adults often worry that this is aggressive, but generally this behaviour occurs because young children do not know how to use words to ask for a toy or they do not yet understand about taking turns.

When an adult sees a child snatching a toy they need to tell the child that the behaviour is not acceptable. This can be done by first saying 'no' in a caring but firm way. The adult then needs to teach the child acceptable ways of behaving in situations like this. This could include:

- › showing the child how to ask for a toy by using words such as 'my turn'
- › talking about the need to share with friends and waiting for a turn
- › helping the child manage the waiting time by offering something else to do
- › giving the child many opportunities to practise asking for a toy and sharing with friends.

'Teaching children language and patience are two important steps in helping them learn how to manage their angry feelings.'



Anger is often mixed with other feelings. Children might feel angry and sad or angry and frustrated or even angry and scared. Adults can help children learn about these different feelings by naming them when they see children feeling this way.

Sometimes we are not completely sure of what a child is feeling but we can have a good guess. Naming feelings not only teaches children words that they can use in positive ways to tell others how they feel, but also reinforces that the way they are feeling is normal. For example, when a child is upset because another child has taken her toy we could say, 'You felt really sad that Kim took your doll', and then, 'You are feeling really angry with her.'

It is part of normal development to see young children hitting, biting and having a tantrum when they do not know how to tell others about their feelings and wants. As children learn different ways of expressing themselves these behaviours usually decrease. Teaching children language and patience are two important steps in helping them learn how to manage their angry feelings. It is also helpful to teach children that it is normal to have angry feelings so that they can then focus on how they manage these feelings in acceptable, safe ways.

There are many reasons why a child might be angry and aggressive:

- › Often it is because they do not know another way of telling others what they want.
- › Sometimes it is because they are frustrated or stressed and don't know how to tell others how they feel.
- › Children can also be angry and aggressive because they have seen other people act in angry ways and they are copying the behaviour.



Children learn many things by watching others. They can learn quickly about how to manage their feelings by watching the people they care about such as family and carers. When children see these adults managing their anger in acceptable and safe ways, such as talking about how they feel, they not only learn different ways of managing their own feelings, but also that feeling angry is ok and not something to be worried about.





Children can also learn about feelings from the consequences of their own actions. For example, Emily wanted a lolly and, when her father would not give her one, she started to scream. She screamed until her father changed his mind and gave her a lolly. Giving Emily the lolly when she screamed teaches her that this behaviour helps her get what she wants. Because of this there is a good chance that next time Emily wants a lolly and her father says 'no' that she will scream again. If in contrast Emily's father did not give her a lolly when she screamed and instead gave her a cuddle and reassured her that she was loved, then, when she stopped screaming, told her why she could not have a lolly, Emily would learn that screaming did not get her what she wanted. How adults respond to children's actions teaches them a great deal about how to manage their anger and aggression.

Young children should not be left playing together without adult supervision. Close supervision enables adults to help when they see a child having difficulty managing their feelings. Sometimes children are angry and aggressive because they do not understand what another child is saying to them. When adults are supervising they can help explain what a child means or needs, reducing frustration for everyone involved.



'Close supervision enables adults to help when they see a child having difficulty managing their feelings.'

Tantrums

Tantrums are common during the toddler period. When a child has a tantrum it is often because he is frustrated and angry and does not know how to express these feelings in an appropriate way. Sometimes the feelings become so strong that they can scare the child because he does not know how to control them. It is important that adults show the child through their own behaviour that angry feelings can be managed and that they will not be punished for a tantrum. During a tantrum a carer should stay with the child and help him get control again.

As children start to use words, it is important to teach them to talk about how they feel, as this can help them learn to control tantrums.

Some suggestions include:

- You can give them words for how they feel. If they look angry you could say, for example, 'You are angry when you have to have a bath. You don't feel good in the water?'
- You can acknowledge how they feel. For instance, if a child says she is angry, you could say, 'I am sorry you are feeling angry; can you tell me about it?'
- After acknowledging a child's feelings, you should show the child that you will do something to help. For example, you could say, 'What shall we do about your angry feelings? Shall we see if a cuddle helps you feel better so we can then figure out what to do?' This helps show children that their emotions are important to those that care for them.



Often adults know when children are about to have a tantrum just by watching the way they are behaving. When adults see a child about to have a tantrum they should intervene to help prevent it. For example, if a child is about to have a tantrum because he wants a toy that another child is playing with, an adult could intervene and distract the child by offering him a different toy to play with and talking to him about how he feels and how important it is to wait for turns when playing with friends.

However, sometimes tantrums cannot be avoided as young children are still learning about their feelings and may lose control of them. During a tantrum it is best for adults to:

- spend quiet time with the child
- allow her to gain control of her emotions again and feel safe
- provide a cuddle or other form of reassurance
- always stay with a child to make sure she is safe and to help her regain control.

'Always stay with a child to make sure she is safe and to help her regain control.'



Consistent ways of doing things are important for young children. Consistency shows children what adults expect from them, and this helps them feel less stressed. Consistency can help reduce angry feelings that lead to tantrums. Children want to make their family and carers happy. One way they can do this is if they know what adults expect from them. For example, when shopping with a child, it can help to have some special things for her to do. This could include giving an older child a small list of items to gather during the shopping trip, or having a special bag of toys for young children to play with during these trips. Such consistency will help teach a child what behaviour you see as acceptable when you go shopping, and can help avoid tantrums. But remember to have some flexibility so that you can take advantage of unexpected opportunities to learn. For instance, on one shopping trip a child might take an interest in triangular shaped boxes and, instead of asking him to gather the items on his list, you could ask him to look for triangular boxes as you move around the shop.

Before we start a new activity with children we should explain what we expect from them. As adults, we often get anxious and stressed by new experiences when we are unsure of what is expected from us, and it is the same for children. Before starting a new activity it is helpful to explain to children:

- › what is going to happen
- › how they might feel
- › how you expect them to behave.

Talking about a new activity or event before it happens can reduce the stress a child feels and the potential for a tantrum. For example, before going to the dentist for the first time, it can be helpful to show children pictures of what the dentist's room looks like, maybe read a story about visiting the dentist and talk about what the dentist will need them to do.

'Talking about a new activity or event before it happens can reduce the stress a child feels and the potential for a tantrum.'



Biting

Biting is common during the toddler period. Children do not automatically know that biting hurts others and when they first start to bite are not intending to be aggressive. It is often just another way of telling others that they want or need something. When a child bites it is important for an adult to tell her that biting is not an appropriate behaviour and it hurt others, and to then teach her a different way of telling others what she wants or needs. For example, if a child bites another child because he wants a particular toy, an adult could tell him, 'No, that hurts your friend. If you want the toy, say "my turn"'. The adult could then show him how to ask for a turn and wait for his friend to respond.

Under no circumstances should an adult bite back a child who has bitten or use other physical punishments such as hitting. Using physical punishment does not teach children the different ways they can tell others how they feel and what they want, and could actually increase biting and aggressive behaviours.

Helping toddlers manage their angry feelings

Toddlers need adults to teach them acceptable and safe ways to manage angry feelings. But remember that toddlers will not necessarily remember what they were taught the first time, so the 'lessons' must be repeated many times before they learn. Practice and patience are very important for learning.

For adults, helping toddlers learn to manage angry feelings involves:

- › teaching toddlers the right words to use so that others understand what they want, need and feel
- › having time to practise using appropriate words for managing angry feelings with different people and in different places
- › making sure that the adults around toddlers are able to manage their own angry feelings appropriately, as toddlers watch and copy adults' behaviours
- › showing young children how to respond to the angry feelings and aggression of other children, by teaching them to say 'no' and 'stop' to those who are aggressive towards them
- › giving a toddler a cuddle and safe place if her angry feelings become so strong that she loses control during a tantrum
- › providing consistency, which helps children understand what is expected from them.

' ... toddlers will not necessarily remember what they were taught the first time, so the "lessons" must be repeated many times before they learn.'



Preschool and early school

Redirecting angry and aggressive feelings

Everyone feels angry at some time. While adults understand that toddlers will sometimes hit, kick, snatch and bite, it is expected that, as children move through the preschool years, they will be able to manage their feelings in positive ways. These positive ways include using words to tell others what they want and feel as well as redirecting their angry feelings into activities that do not harm themselves or others.

'There are many different ways that children can redirect their angry feelings.'

Children do not automatically know how to redirect their angry feelings into safe and acceptable activities. They need adults to show them different acceptable ways to release physical and mental emotions. For example, children's bodies can get very tense when they are angry, and they then need a physical activity to release the anger, such as jumping a rope or running around a playground. At other times children might be upset by their anger and need an activity that lets them release their sadness such as painting, sand/water play, or having a cuddle from a carer.



There are many different ways that children can redirect their angry feelings. Each child will have different needs and interests that families and carers need to consider when redirecting. While one child might like to paint, another child might like to listen to an adult reading her a story. Activities that can help children redirect their anger and aggression include:

- › running, climbing and other strenuous play
- › kicking a ball
- › pounding clay
- › singing and dancing
- › having a cuddle
- › painting or drawing a picture
- › reading a book in a quiet corner
- › talking about how they feel
- › listening to music
- › playing with sand or water.



Learning about angry feelings and assertion

Getting other people to understand what we want, need and feel often requires us to be assertive. Assertion is not the same as aggression. Assertion is about letting others know about our needs, wants and feelings in safe and acceptable ways. Aggression does this in ways that are not acceptable and can hurt others. It can take a little practice for preschoolers to work out the difference between being assertive and aggressive. They often need adults to help them learn this difference. Giving preschoolers regular opportunities to practise being assertive instead of aggressive is important for their learning.



'Assertion is about letting others know about our needs, wants and feelings in safe and acceptable ways.'

There are many stories written for preschool-aged children that help teach different ways of managing angry feelings, how to be assertive, and how to respond to anger and aggression in other children. Some suggested stories are presented at the end of this book. Sharing stories like these with children, and talking about how the characters in the stories behave, helps children learn about aggression, anger and assertion in safe ways.



Learning to manage angry feelings at preschool and early school

By the time children reach preschool age they know a lot about language. However, they are still learning how to use these new language skills and sometimes use them in ways that can hurt other children. For example, telling children who they can and cannot play with, teasing someone about their clothes and calling people names are common behaviours from preschoolers. These behaviours, which can stem from a child's anger, tend to be more common in young girls than boys. It is very important that adults notice when children tease and name-call so that these children are made aware that it is not ok. When responding to actions such as teasing, an adult can:

- first, tell the offending child that the behaviour is not ok, by saying 'no' and that it hurts others
- second, give attention to the child that has been the victim of such behaviour and make sure this child is safe
- next, teach the child who was angry different ways of behaving, such as using words or redirecting the anger into activities such as painting
- finally, look at reasons why the child is angry and teasing.



Sometimes children tease others because they are feeling scared, stressed or anxious. Often children are able to talk about feeling angry but not always about the other feelings they have such as stress and fear. This can happen because their angry feelings are so strong that they do not notice the other underlying emotions. Talking to children about all the different feelings they have with anger is important. For example, a preschooler might angrily kick the wall but also be worried because his mum is in hospital. An adult could say to him, 'You are kicking that wall in an angry way. Are you worried about mum in hospital? Tell me about it.' After talking, the adult might find an activity to enable the child to redirect his worry, such as painting a picture.

'Sometimes children tease others because they are feeling scared, stressed or anxious.'

Even when children know many different ways of managing their angry feelings, they still need adults to supervise them and to sometimes intervene. For example, when a child tries to tell another child what he wants and how he is feeling, and that child does not respond, it can be very frustrating for the child who is trying to manage his feelings in a positive way. In situations like this it can be helpful for an adult to intervene and teach the child who is not responding how to manage her own feelings.

When a child is physically hurt by another child who is being aggressive it is important for an adult to intervene, help the child who has been hurt and then teach the child who has been aggressive different ways of managing her angry feelings. The adult then needs to find out why the anger occurred and deal with the cause. For instance, if the anger occurred because one child did not know how to express her angry feelings using words yet, then it would be useful to have closer adult supervision of this child when she plays with others. By supervising her more closely adults could intervene when she tried to express her anger in negative ways and teach her words she could use to express her feelings positively.

'Irrespective of how children behave we need to let them know that they are always loved and accepted ...'



Encourage love and acceptance

Irrespective of how children behave we need to let them know that they are always loved and accepted. The adults who care for children need to:

- show them that they will not let the child's overwhelming feelings get out of hand and that they will not let the child feel unsafe or unaccepted
- let them know that they will not go away and leave them if they are feeling angry and out of control
- provide comfort for them when they are out of control and guide them when they are feeling angry.

When to get help

Angry feelings are a part of normal development. Children need to know that it is ok to feel angry and that there are acceptable and safe ways to express their anger. All toddlers will go through a period when they seem to hit and push other children more than previously. They might also go through a time when they bite and snatch and have tantrums. While some of these behaviours are not helpful, they are a part of normal development for young children. If the strategies suggested are not effective and a child is still having trouble managing her feelings, particularly if, by the end of the preschool years, they are expressing them in ways that are not safe, consider seeking professional help such as talking to your GP, a child psychologist or counsellor.





Books to share with children

Crary, E., & Steelsmith, S. (1996). *When you're mad and you know it*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

Doleski, T. (1983). *The hurt*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Katz, K. (2004). *No hitting! A lift-the-flap book*. New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap.

Moses, B. (2001). *I feel angry*. London: Hodder Wayland.

Oram, H., & Kitamura, S. (1993). *Angry Arthur*. England: Red Fox.

Spelman, C. (2000). *When I feel angry*. Morton Grove, Illinois: A. Whitman.

Thomas, O. (2000). *Stop picking on me. A first look at bullying*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series.

Verdick, E. (2004). *Words are not for hurting*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.



Resources for parents and carers

Goldstein, S., Brooks, R., & Weiss, S. K. (2004). *Angry children, worried parents: Seven steps to help families manage anger*. Plantation, FL: Specialty Press.

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Everyday learning about managing angry feelings

How do you respond when one child hits another when he won't give up the toy she wants?

Or when your two-year-old is on the verge of a tantrum in the supermarket because you won't buy that chocolate bar?

Having angry feelings or feeling aggressive is normal. All children have these feelings at some time but how each child manages these feelings will be different. Most children learn to manage their feelings in safe and acceptable ways. However, sometimes children cannot manage their feelings.

Everyday learning about managing angry feelings, by experienced teacher and psychologist Dr Diane Szarkowicz, is a helpful book that outlines a range of positive strategies to assist carers and parents to give young children ways of developing self-control and expressing feelings safely.

