

Children's Anger Management Checklist

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Introduction

Almost every child goes through a phase when they get angry and have a tantrum.

As a parent or teacher, you've probably experienced your fair share of 'Terrible Twos' meltdowns, when little kids simply couldn't process their big feelings. But what about the emotional outbursts of older children who, you'd think, should know better?

It's normal to have moments of frustration, disappointment, and even anger. Grown-ups experience these emotions as much as children do, but regardless of their age, when a person can't control their temper, problems usually arise.

Is your child's anger 'normal'?

Perhaps you are concerned because:

- Your child's tantrums and outbursts are occurring past the age at which they're developmentally expected (around 6-7 years of age)
- Their behaviour poses a danger to themselves or others
- Your son or daughter's tantrums and defiance are causing a lot of conflict at home and disrupting family life
- Their behaviour is affecting their participation at preschool or school, where teachers report that your child's behaviour is hard to control
- Other children say that they are afraid of your child
- Your son or daughter's angry behaviour is interfering with their ability to get along with peers, causing them to be excluded from social occasions like play dates and birthday parties
- Your child is upset because they feel they can't control their anger, and that makes them feel bad about themselves

In this resource, the Kids First Children's Services team offers some strategies and information to support your understanding of children who repeatedly meltdown, lash out physically or verbally, or withdraw in a sulk.

We hope it helps you and the kids in your life.



Sonja Walker
Founder

Kids First Children's Services

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The checklist below covers the more common signs of anger in children. Of course, all children demonstrate these kinds of behaviours at some point, but if you consistently observe several of these responses in your child, it may be helpful to seek professional advice.

Rate each statement according to the following scale and enter the rating in the appropriate space:

0= My child never or rarely does this

1 = My child occasionally does this (no more than once a month).

2= My child often (once or more a week) does this.

3= My child does this frequently (daily or several times a week).

Behaviour	Rarely 0	Occasionally 1	Often 2	Frequently 3
My child blames others for his or her troubles.				
My child throws or breaks things whenever he / she feels frustrated or irritated.				
Whenever my child gets angry, it takes a lot to calm or placate him / her				
My child does not like change of any sort and becomes angry when change is forced on him / her.				
My child changes the rules of games when playing with other children.				
My child says spiteful things whenever things don't go his / her way				
My child is negative, deliberately slow and resists doing what he / she is told to do to the point that it becomes a standoff between us.				
My child seeks out arguments or reasons to become upset, even when everything is at peace.				

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Behaviour	Rarely 0	Occasionally 1	Often 2	Frequently 3
My child ostracises, criticises and complains about others.				
My child loses control when she / he is angry and lashes out physically				
My child swears or uses foul language whenever he / she gets angry				
When my child is learning something new, he / she is easily frustrated and wants to do something else.				
My child is stubborn and refuses to do what he / she is told unless I use the right tone of voice or approach.				
My child's peers don't like to play with him / her because he / she is such a bad sport.				
My child gets into fights with other children and has great difficulty controlling his / her temper when teased.				

Checklist Score Interpretation

- 0-5** Anger and frustration are not your child's typical responses to challenging situations.
- 6-11** Your child is showing relatively typical responses to anger and irritation, however, please note that a higher score (nearer 10) is more appropriate for younger children aged under 6. A lower score (nearer 6) is more appropriate for older children.
- 12-17** Your child is beginning to show an elevated degree of anger response. Again, a higher score is more appropriate for younger children. Some support for your child's capacity to manage challenging situations may be needed.
- 18+** Your child may benefit from professional support to better manage their anger and personal relationships.

A close-up photograph of a young child with light blonde hair and blue eyes. The child has a grumpy, angry expression, with a furrowed brow and a downturned mouth. They are resting their chin on their arms, which are crossed on a wooden surface. The child is wearing a blue and green plaid shirt.

Understanding children's anger

Understanding Children's Anger

While it's completely normal for kids to experience moments of frustration, disappointment, and sadness, when children continue to have regular emotional outbursts, it's usually a symptom of some kind of distress.

At Kids First, we often say that 'behaviour is communication'.

Working out the underlying cause of a child's behaviour is the first step to identifying what their reactions and responses are telling us.

Regardless of whether you are a parent or teacher, being able to understand the 'triggers' that contribute to your child's behaviour is key to supporting their capacity to manage their anger.



Anxiety



Understanding Children's Anger ... Anxiety

Children who seem angry and defiant sometimes have severe, and unrecognised, anxiety.

While you might usually associate symptoms like excessive 'clinginess', shyness or even social avoidance as signs of anxiety, angry behaviour can also be an anxious child's 'go-to' in situations that are difficult.

This is because some anxious children feel an overwhelming need to escape from a situation that makes them uncomfortable.

To you as a grown-up, that avoidant behaviour may look like anger or defiance.

It may present as aggressive actions and words, too.

According to Australia's Beyond Blue,

- 6.9% of children and young people (aged 4 to 17 years) suffered from an anxiety disorder in the past 12 months.¹
- 13.9% of children and young people (aged 4 to 17 years) met the criteria for a diagnosis of a mental disorder in the last 12 months.¹
- Half of all the mental health conditions we experience at some point in our lives will have started by age 14 ²

These compelling statistics offer important reasons to take anxiety seriously as a potential contributor to your child's anger.

If your child is struggling with anxiety, and especially if they're hiding it, they may struggle to cope with situations that cause them distress.

For example, they may lash out when the demands at preschool or school put pressure on them that they can't handle.

In an anxiety-inducing situation, your child's "fight or flight" instinct may take hold ... they may have a tantrum or refuse to do something to avoid the source of acute fear.

Who can help?

If this sounds like your child, it's worth seeking the advice of a qualified medical or mental health professional so that your child's anxiety is not misinterpreted by themselves and others.

References

¹ Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR. (2015). The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. Canberra: Department of Health.

² Kessler, RD et al. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. Archives of General Psychiatry, 62: p. 593-602.

A close-up portrait of a young girl with long, straight brown hair and freckles. She is wearing a light blue t-shirt and looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage and a path.

ADHD

Understanding Children's Anger ... ADHD

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, is a condition that makes it unusually difficult for children to pay attention, sit still, follow directions, and control impulsive behaviour.

Many children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder find it very hard to comply with instructions or switch from one activity to another, and that makes them appear defiant and angry.

If your child or student has ADHD, you might notice that their inability to focus and complete tasks can also lead to tantrums, arguing, and power struggles.

Their inattention and impulsivity may also affect their friendships, extra-curricular activities, and family life.

They may have trouble making and keeping friends because they are prone to losing their temper when they don't get their way.

It's not uncommon for children with severe ADHD to be excluded from playdates because their erratic behaviour means they can't be relied on to get along with other children.

Kids with ADHD may have trouble playing on teams because they find it hard to focus and follow the rules.

At home, they may find themselves on a collision course with you and your other children because they don't follow instructions, are impulsive, and melt down when they are asked to transition from an activity they enjoy to a less favoured task like mealtime, homework time, or bedtime.

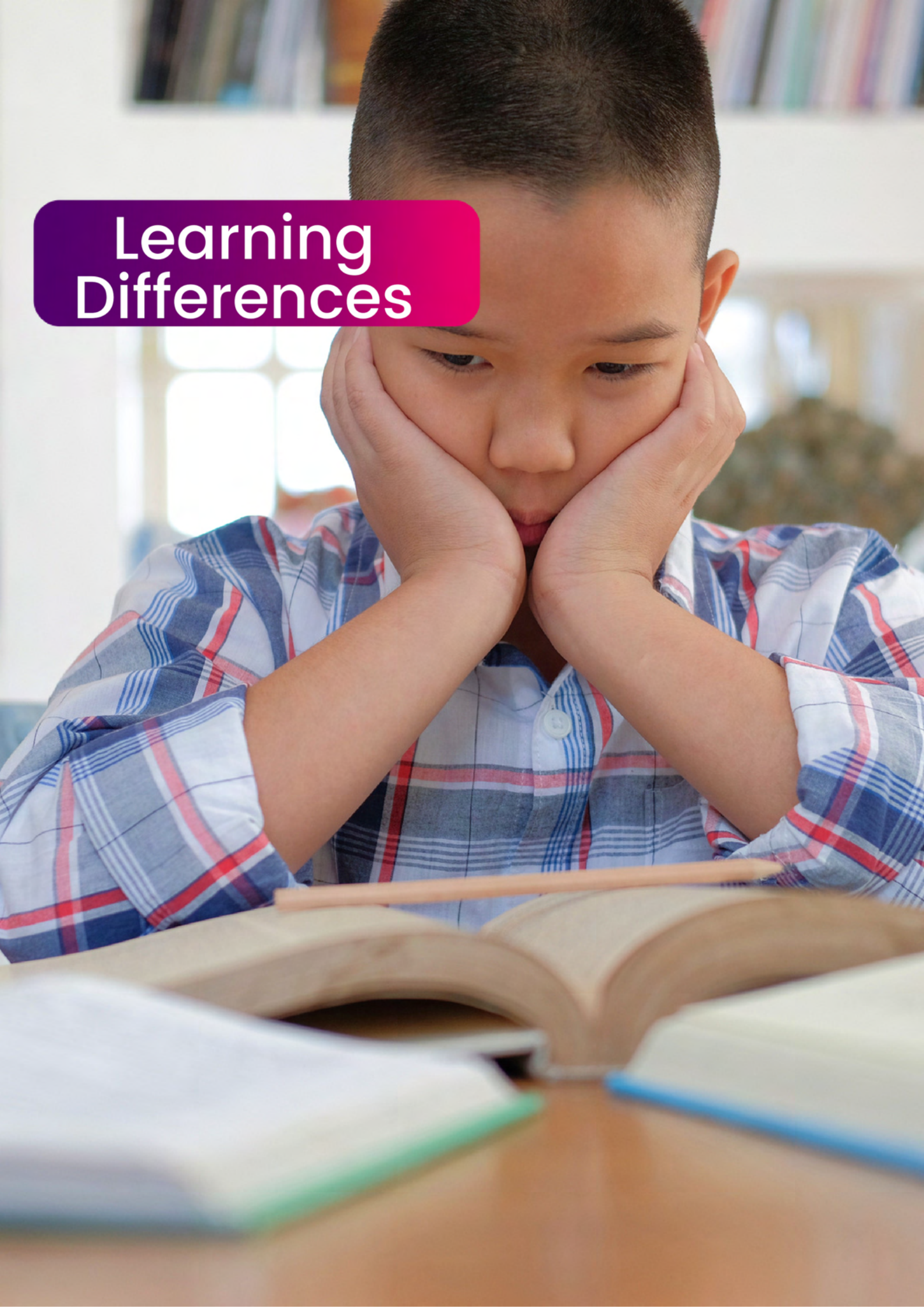
The frustration that accompanies all of these kinds of experiences is understandable and may be one of the many reasons that a child with ADHD can feel angry and misunderstood.

ADHD is sometimes overlooked in kids who have a history of severe anger and aggression because there are so many bigger issues.

Who can help?

If you think your emotionally explosive child may be affected by a condition like ADHD, get professional advice from your child's GP, a Behavioural and Developmental Paediatrician, school counsellor or child psychologist.

Learning Differences



Understanding Children's Anger ... Learning Differences

When your child is repeatedly angry at school or during homework time, it's possible that they have an undiagnosed learning disorder or specific learning difficulty.

It is common for kids who have learning differences to feel frustrated, sad, anxious, or embarrassed in the classroom, and to respond with anger and emotion as an escape strategy.

Sometimes kids who have learning difficulties are upset because they think they are 'dumb' or feel physically exhausted because they need to work harder to learn than their peers do.

When a child spends a lot of time on something that is difficult for them, it's probably natural for them to resist that experience and feel irritable. As an adult, you'd do the same, wouldn't you?

Rather than ask for help, your child with a learning difference may rip an assignment up or create conflict with another child simply to divert attention away from their real issues.

Alternately, they may take on the persona of the 'class clown' or adopt an 'I don't care' attitude as a way of saving face.

The last thing most kids want is to look different from their friends. When a child with learning differences is withdrawn from class for learning support or called on by the teacher for something they're afraid they can't deliver, they may feel embarrassed, singled out and angry.

These experiences day after day can damage a child's self-esteem, wear their spirit down and make them dread going to school.

The angry outbursts that come when your child refuses to do their homework, go to school or behave appropriately in class can be infuriating for you as a teacher or parent, because you know that your child has so much potential.

If you suspect that your child's anger issues may be related to their learning, it's important to know that by definition, a learning disability can only be diagnosed in someone with average or above-average intelligence.

Children with learning disabilities often have a high IQ, however, their learning disability is holding them back from demonstrating their true intelligence in daily achievements.

Understanding Children's Anger ... Learning Differences

So if you find it hard to understand why your bright, seemingly capable child has turned into a miserable, defiant kid who hates school investigating how your child learns could be a helpful exercise.

Hearing explicitly that a learning disability has nothing to do with intelligence can be very powerful for children who have unique learning needs.

When their learning needs are identified and accommodated in the classroom and curriculum, life at school can improve. Your child may feel less angry and better understood.

It may also help your son or daughter to know that many famously successful people also experience learning differences.

For example, actors Keira Knightly, Tom Cruise, and Orlando Bloom, as well as movie director Steven Spielberg and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver have been diagnosed with dyslexia. Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe has dyspraxia.

Who can help?

If you feel that your child's behavioural struggles may be linked to an unidentified learning disability, seek advice from your son or daughter's teacher and the learning support team at their school.

Your child's school counsellor, GP, paediatrician or child psychologist may also be able to assist with assessments to identify your child's unique needs so that accommodations for your child's learning style can be made



A young boy with dark hair is looking down at a table, appearing focused or perhaps a bit sad. In the background, a woman with blonde hair is smiling and looking towards him. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor setting like a classroom or playroom. A purple rounded rectangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the word "Autism" in white text.

Autism

Understanding Children's Anger ... Autism

Children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are often prone to dramatic meltdowns. If your child is 'on the spectrum' they may tend to be quite rigid in their thinking and need a consistent routine to feel safe.

Kids with ASD sometimes find that any unexpected change can set them on the road to angry behaviour that can be hard to predict and manage.

If you are the parent or teacher of a child with autism, you may find that your child or student:

- Finds it hard to understand how others feel
- Has real difficulty with showing how they feel in a socially appropriate way
- Doesn't understand relationships
- Has trouble reading and using body language
- Can't see 'the big picture', focussing instead on small details and very little else
- Struggles with changes in their routine
- Gets extremely focused on specific topics or objects of intense interest
- May be sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or smells

Some kids who are on the spectrum have sensory issues that cause them to be overwhelmed by stimulation in their environment.

A busy, noisy, smelly, or brightly lit environment can sometimes cause a 'short circuit' in an autistic child's coping system and may result in a meltdown that continues until they wear themselves (and you) out with exhaustion.

If you suspect that your child or student's angry outbursts are related to their inability to communicate their wants or needs, seeking advice is important.

Who can help?

Speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and early intervention specialists often support children with ASD to manage the social, emotional, and learning demands of their lives.

Behavioural and Developmental paediatricians, psychiatrists and suitably qualified psychologists can also help you to identify if your child has ASD.



Trauma

Stop

Understanding Children's Anger ... Trauma

For some children, angry outbursts can be the result of trauma.

Often, this is not just one event, but ongoing exposure to abuse, neglect, uncertainty, or violence at home or in a child's neighbourhood.

Exposure to trauma is never a child's fault.

Kids who experience chaos at home can bring that frenetic energy and defensive behaviour into other environments. Trauma can affect the way they act at home, preschool and school, and sadly, kids who have gone through it are often very good at hiding their pain.

If you are the teacher or parent of a child who has experienced trauma, you may notice that they have little trust in others. They may struggle to connect with adults and be reluctant to ask for help.

Because kids who have experienced trauma are so alert to any perceived threat, their behaviour may come across as being angry or aggressive.

As a result, they are often punished, and so the cycle of judgement and aggression spirals down because some schools offer very little latitude for kids who provoke adults and push the people who try to help them away.

Traumatised children often see the world in a negative way. They sometimes think that everyone is out to get them.

They may wear their anger like armour, and so is it little wonder that they come across as angry?

Some children who have been through trauma also develop the belief that they're bad, and that what has happened to them is their fault. This leads to the expectation that people are not going to like them or treat them well.

Who can help?

If this sounds like a child you care about, it is vital to express your concerns to a professional who may be in a position to help. Speak with members of the child's family, doctor, school counsellor or a child psychologist.

Alternately, to report suspected child abuse or neglect, call the Child Protection Helpline on 132 111 (open 24 hours/7 days).

What Can You Do If Your Child Has Anger Issues?

If you are a parent or teacher, one thing is for certain. At some point, you will deal with an angry child.

Often, we end up in shouting matches with our kids. There are no winners in these situations and family relationships can be easily damaged by them.

At other times, we are so mortified by our kids' angry behaviour that we freeze up, not knowing what to do when a temper tantrum or meltdown takes the oxygen out of the room.

Anger is a normal emotion in children and adults alike, but how we express and deal with our feelings of anger is the difference between living in relative peace and feeling like we are at our wits' end with our children.

How we teach our kids to manage their emotions when they are young also provides them with the skills they need to lead positive, healthy, and happy adult lives.

If any of the behaviours highlighted in this resource sound familiar and you feel that you are building your life around an angry child, then it is time for a change.

Supporting your child to learn new ways to manage their feelings at an early age can prevent future heartache and ensure that your son or daughter can build positive relationships now and in the future.

Who can help?

Your child's teachers, family doctor or paediatrician are excellent places to start if you are concerned about your child's anger issues.

Should you feel that your child's communication, sensory or emotional regulation struggles are contributing to their frustrated behaviour, a paediatric speech pathologist, occupational therapist or psychologist may also be able to assist.

Kids First Children's Services is located in Sydney' northern beaches. In addition to multi-disciplinary allied health therapies, Kids First offers popular small group therapy programs for children aged 4 to 14. Please feel welcome to contact us on (02) 9938 5419 or www.kidsfirst.com.au if we can help a child you care about.



- Speech Therapy
- Psychology & Counselling
- Occupational Therapy
- Early Intervention Support
- Social Skills Groups
- Ready Set School Groups
- Lego Therapy Groups
- Art Therapy Groups
- Cool Kids Anxiety Groups