

Anger

Anger's purpose

Its purpose is often to energise us into taking action and this is why we sometimes feel angry when we're frightened, such as when our child runs into the road or when we feel overloaded with too much to do. Anger can help us assert ourselves but may be frightening to others especially to small children or if it's expressed in an aggressive way.

Anger can help children develop their independence. When the child is saying 'no' to the parent or refuses to do anything the parent asks, the child is really trying to say 'I'm me not you, I'm me'. The 'Terrible Twos' can be quite a shock to parents when their baby is walking and asserting himself.

Anger and independence

All children need to show their independence. If we crush that we risk also crushing the kind of energy that can come from anger. As adults our role is to help children learn to recognise when they're angry, to work out how to handle it, and to eventually calm it down. They will need this skill for the rest of their lives... to deal with an annoying child at school or an annoying boss at work.

Recognising anger

From what we have learnt about containment and reciprocity, the function of a containing and reciprocal relationship for a child is that the adult tunes into the child's cues, recognises that the child is angry but does not become overwhelmed by this. The adult is able to communicate to the child that their anger is a response to something understandable and that these feelings can be regulated or managed.

In other words, the adult can show to the child that they understand that the child is angry about something. This can help the child to calm down or 'downregulate', the first step to processing the situation. Containment restores the capacity to think. However, this is not easy in the middle of a toddler or a teenager losing their temper!

Repairing ruptures in relationships

If you can use an understanding response towards an angry child, you can help the child eventually learn how to do this for himself. This relates to 'rupture and repair'. Rupture and repair is very important for all our relationships. We are never always in step or in tune with each other. There are many times we fall out or are not in tune with each other.

The vital thing is not the falling out, it is the ability to get back together, the 'repair' after the 'rupture'. When a child and parent become 'out of tune' the

parent's role is to help the child to learn how a relationship is repaired. They do this in the things they say and do to help the child calm down and get back in tune with each other.

Helping your child understand what is happening

A parent who just walks away from a child who is in the middle of a temper tantrum may be helping their own feelings of frustration by ignoring the child, but they're unlikely to be helping the child understand what is happening, or encouraging him to explore ways of dealing with it. On the other hand, the parent may need to walk away, because they need time to calm down or manage their own anger before they can help their child.

If you just ignore your child's temper tantrum, the temper tantrum may indeed stop, because they do eventually, but whether the child learns anything constructive for when he next has the same feelings is another issue.