

DEALING WITH an ANGRY or DIFFICULT TEEN

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What Is Anger?

Dr. Tim Murphy (The *Angry Child*, Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2001) defines anger as:

A powerful response, triggered by another negative emotion, that results in an attack of variable intensity that is not always appropriate.
(p. 16)

There are five key things to note in this definition:

1. Anger is a **POWERFUL** emotion
2. It is a **RESPONSE** to some other factor or factors.
3. It requires a **TRIGGER**
4. It varies as to its **INTENSITY**; it is nonetheless **INTENSE**
5. It is **NOT** always **APPROPRIATE**, which is to say that **THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT IS APPROPRIATE**.

<1> UNDERSTANDING TEENAGE ANGER



0 Changing & Raging Hormones -- physiological changes during puberty lead to mood swings. The boy is becoming the man, the girl is becoming the woman: both transitioning into adults capable of sexual reproduction.

With teenage boys this change is marked by an increase in testosterone levels, resulting in a greater predisposition to frustrations and anger. Testosterone is the hormone of sex and aggression. The teenage male has to accommodate these new emotions while making sense of them and develop appropriate self-controls as demanded by society

For teenage girls, they must not only adjust to physical changes that invariably draw the attention of boys, but they too are undergoing hormonal and internal physical changes that will lead to the onset of menstrual cycles: a cycle often marked by moodiness and depression.

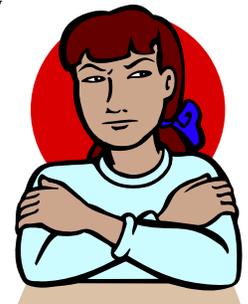
For the average teen this period of life is generally a time of uncertainty, self-consciousness, moodiness, conflicted emotions, and irrational urges.

0 Transitioning to Adulthood – and that Can Be Frightening

This is a stage in life where the child is moving toward adulthood and an unknown future. While the teen may not be always conscious of this transition phase and may not always be pondering the future, there is nonetheless an ever-present background level of anxiety and doubts about what lies ahead. This too, contributes to a teenager's mood, manifesting at times as wistful day-dreaming, quiet times of withdrawal to ponder the future, or –depending on the child and the home environment – times of anxiety and outright fear. If, as parents, we are always expressing negatives and/or fears and apprehensions about the current state of society, the economy, and such, we will only reinforce the fears that may already be in the emerging young adult. Children and Teenagers take their cues from us.

0 Why Teens Are Difficult : They Are Developing a Sense of Self

The teen years are a period of experimentation and exploration during which the teen is attempting to establish a sense of self as distinct from parents, siblings and peers. Despite following fads and going through times where your teen will look and act like his or her friends, it is nonetheless an attempt at finding a unique identity.



This search may, at times, conflict with moral, cultural and disciplinary values of his or her family of origin: a condition that leads to the next annoying and - if pursued to the extreme- can lead to troubling and sometimes dangerous Antisocial behaviors.

0 Testing Limits / Pressing Your Buttons--



As a parent you are likely to have "hot buttons" and your teen is sure to find them. Typical parental hot buttons are:

- > **Home Work** ... *because we know grades are important to earning power and a good future*
- > **Skipping School** ... *because we appreciate and value education*
- > **Too Much Time Spent On The Computer or With Video Games** ... *because we see it as wasted time and an addictive behavior. For the teen it is both entertainment and escapism.*
- > **Household Chores** ... *because it teaches responsibility and discipline as well as imparting good habits and hygiene for when they move out on their own. Plus there comes a time when they must accept that you are not running a hotel.*
- > **Disrespectful Behavior** ... *swearing, making rude gestures, name calling, blatant ignoring you and giving the silent treatment.*
- > **Dishonesty** – *lying, fabrication of stories to cover tracks, outright denial of things you know he or she did.*
- > **Ignoring House Rules** ... *sneaking a smoke in the bathroom, bringing drugs into the home, having opposite sex friends stay over: in their room no less.*
- > **Ignoring Curfews**
- > **Ignoring Simple Requests or not showing simple courtesies...** *Like not informing parents of social plans and school schedules; not taking time to call in and let you know where they are; not acknowledging birthdays; being mean and disrespectful to siblings or other relatives, and friends.*

<2>KNOWING THE TRAITS OF THE ANGRY CHILD / THE ANGRY TEEN

0 Typical Behaviors

1. An angry child – an angry teen – makes his or her own misery. Their behavior – or misbehavior – antagonizes and annoys. If they are ignoring school and getting behind in assigned homework and studies, they are only compounding an already serious situation.

2. Can't analyze problems. As is often the case with angry adults, an angry teen cannot analyze the problem. Rational thought is blinded by anger. There is a shortsighted, one sided view of the world. The brain is hijacked by hormones and neuro-chemicals that focus thought on one thing: protecting my rights and my position. If nothing is resolved, if the cause of the anger persists without ever being discussed, anger will simply build on anger. In children and teens this is further complicated by the fact that in their short lifetime, and in their immaturity, they have not yet developed the skills necessary to step back and take a look at the broader picture that weighs all the facts. They are operating on a near-term time horizon in which 16 is too far away, and 25 is old. So they are not only mentally and emotionally near-sighted, they are also working with blinders on that focus attention only on what is directly and immediately before them at that point in time.



3. Blames Others for his or her Misfortune. Again, this is not unique to teenagers alone. Many an adult does this – just look at the number of lawsuits where we try to get other people to pay the price of our own stupidity (like the infamous MacDonald's coffee case: coffee is hot people, and it will scald you if you spill it on yourself). Bu we all try to deflect shame and blame and deny our role in things.

4. Turns Bad Feelings into Mad Feelings**5. Lacks empathy** (see next topic below)**6. Sees as Anger As Power; and****7. Confuses Anger and Aggression with Self-Esteem** especially if there is payoff that rewards the bad behavior. If I get what I want, by being nasty and pushy, and mean then I'll keep at it.**8. Often Uses Anger to get attention** particularly where he or she feels they have to compete for attention. Any attention is good – even if it is negative.**0 Understand that the Brain Is Still Developing**

When I first was introduced to Developmental Psychology as a course in my studies, I was amazed to discover that the human brain is still developing: forming, shaping, and growing all throughout adolescence until the ripe old age of 24. In particular, the prefrontal lobe, which regulates planning and evaluation [our ability to assess outcomes and consequences of our actions], is not mature until our mid-twenties.

Cognitive maturity occurs as the brain matures and studies indicate that abstract and critical reasoning skills are still evolving during the college years. Experience and opportunities to learn are shown to play a key role in this phase. The ability to feel emotions such as empathy and sympathy, real love [unconditional love] and attachment mature during this stage.

0 When The Anger & Frustration Turns Inward

40 percent or so of teenagers have periods of **depression**. This is partly due to hormonal changes and the mood fluctuations will abate with time as the body and mind transition. Depression can also be the result of turning anger and frustration inwards on oneself. If a person is angry and frustrated, emotionally conflicted with no apparent cause or outlet, and moreover is being targeted and blamed for his or her condition, then they will turn to self-blaming. Secondly, teenagers are very self-conscious about their physical appearance at this time and self-esteem and self-confidence are sometimes at a low point. Rejection by the opposite sex because of acne, being turned down for sports teams, not fitting in with the “brainy” crowd because of scholastic difficulties can all conspire to trigger depression.

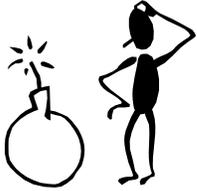
Warning signs of depression are:

- Persistent sad or irritable mood
- Loss of interest in activities that he or she once enjoyed.
- Significant loss of appetite or significant increase in appetite [resorting to comfort foods]
- Oversleeping or difficulty sleeping
- Loss of energy
- Agitated or lethargic
- Difficulty concentrating
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- Frequent vague physical complaints
- Frequent absences from school and/or poor school performance
- Talk of running away from home
- Outbursts of shouting, complaining, and unexplained irritability
- Anger, hostility
- Easily bored



- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Reckless behavior
- Social isolation; loss of interest in friends
- Difficulty with relationships; long-term friendships are broken off.

<3> RECOGNIZING ANGER STAGES SO YOU CAN INTERVENE EARLY



Anger is an emotion that builds in stages. First there is the **Build-Up** as negative experiences, frustrations, disappointments, and other stressors accumulate.

Next comes some **Spark or Trigger**. This can be something said, or an error of omission or commission on your part as parent or something said or done by a friend or teacher. It is something that hits or teen's "hot-button" (see next section) leading to the next stage: **The Explosion**.

The "**Explosion**" is usually obvious. Overt ways are: Raised voices, insults, name calling, maybe even things thrown, walls hit or kicked, followed by threats (of grounding, of leaving etc.). Or, things may happen in a more subtle form (covert behavior): withdrawal, silence, refusal to participate in things, passive-aggressive behavior (looks for opportunities to sabotage family activities or displaces their anger on to younger brothers and sisters in vindictive and covert fashions).



Then there follows the '**Aftermath**'. This stage is likely to be marked by one of three behaviors or a combination of mixed reactions:

1. Puzzlement and confusion over what happened; and / or

2. A desire to emotionally and mentally want to "runaway" and just ignore and forget the event, while all the while praying and hoping it never happens again. Or, Ideally



3. A sit-down (as a family if appropriate and feasible) with the offender, letting him or her know that:

(a) They are still loved, and have your support regardless of their behavior; and

(b) It is okay to get angry and express negative feelings; BUT

(b) Their behavior is unacceptable and disruptive to the family. Rather they need to learn how to come to you and voice their anger, their worries and concerns before exploding.



<4> Understand that behind “Anger” is often Four Primary Emotions

- **Hurt** ... due to rejection and / or sense of injustice
- **Fear** ... Due to perceived Insecurity- fear for our safety; fear of change; fear of not being in control.
- **Protection of "Self"** ... protecting self-image; protecting self-esteem
- **Frustration** ... having our goals blocked; having our plans fail; not seeming to get justice done;



BEHIND ANGER IS OFTEN ...

- **HURT**
 - ...rejection
 - ...emotional pain
 - ...personal anguish
 - ...feelings of guilt
 - ...physical pain
- **FEAR**
 - ...loss of security
 - ...fear for physical safety
 - ...loss of reputation, damaged self-image, loss of face
- **FRUSTRATION**
 - ...blocked goals
 - ...injustices
 - ...sense of being powerless

R. K. Howell PhD, MGCPCP - Insights Counselor / Sep. 2004

<5>STAYING AHEAD OF YOUR ANGRY TEEN

0 Know That Your Teen Has Hot Buttons Too:



Just as you have your “Buttons” so it is that your teenager has buttons of their own. Typical teenage buttons are:

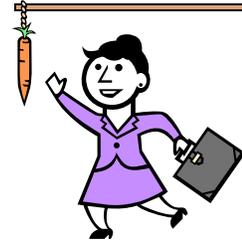
1. Being Preached and Lectured
2. Negative Labeling (Your ‘Lazy’; You’re a ‘Failure’; You’re a Bum; You’re a ‘Punk’ etc.)
3. Negative “Futurizing” (You’ll never be anything; You won’t get into college; You’ll be on welfare all your live.)
4. Collective (Accumulated) Criticisms (If told something repeatedly, overtime those repeated criticisms take root as permanent self-perceptions and come to be believed as the “truth” about who I am.)
5. Instant Problem Solving instead of Listening and Talking –Hearing What They Have to Say (Sometimes they just want to solve their own problems and run their solutions by you; not have you solve their problems for them).

0 Taking Proactive Remedial Action

#1. Tackle only one or two problems at a time. Don't try to change your teenager over night or to correct every bad habit you see. Try to isolate and identify the one or two things that you see as truly being self-sabotaging or likely to be truly limiting his or her potential down the road.

#2. Remember YOU CANNOT CHANGE SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT WANT TO CHANGE. Change – or the desire to change has to come from within the individual. Therefore you have to create the environment and the inducements that motivate change.

Things like homework, school, and choice of friends have to be framed in the context of encouraging positive life–choices yet avoid being received as lecturing and nagging. The goal is to instill the ability in the teen to make their own choices and give them the assurance and confidence that you can be trust them.



#3. Settle on what is “Essential” and what is “Non-Essential” as far as house rules and as acceptable behavior. This requires addressing what are reasonable, and realistic expectations and throwing out things that are not ever likely to happen – and are neither essential or realistic. (For example: Is a tidy room 24/7 realistic and essential?; Is it realistic to expect your 16 year old to attend church with you?; Is it reasonable to expect a teenage son to go to you mother's place every Sunday? ; What chores Must be done and what would be Nice to have done?)



#4. Along with settling on what is essential, and what is not, is learning to “Pick Your Battles”. This requires wisdom and consistency in choices. The idea is to teach you teenager that there are certain rules that will not be bent and specific behaviors that will not be tolerated– under any circumstance. You have to establish – with firmness (and in love) – that there are some things that you will not back down on. However, for this to work effectively, you may have to sit down with your teen and go through the next exercise.

#5. Decide What Is Negotiable and What Is Not. Of the rules that govern the running of your home, and the rules that you expect you teen to abide by, it is sometimes necessary to identify those that you are willing to be flexible on under certain circumstances. Typical are those concerning curfew times and staying over with friends. For example, it is sometimes advantages to have a curfew (a time when your teen must be home and in for the night) of 8 pm or 9 pm during the week and then extend it to 11 pm on weekends (an maybe even Midnite or 1 am as he or she gets older and has part-time work or other commitments)

#6. Be Age Appropriate- Act Accordingly. A 17 year old should be more responsible and mature than a 13 year old. But also remember, in any conflict with your children, you are the adult and as such must act the part. You must be able to step back from the emotional ledge, calmly collect yourself and model rational, mature behavior. (Not easy sometimes though is it?).

#7. Reward Desired, Acceptable, and Responsible Behavior.

The idea is to acknowledge and reinforce desirable behavior. This can be done by doing such things as –

- (a) Cooking a favorite meal
- (b) Adding an extra hour to curfew times on a weekend.
- (c) Awarding tickets to a movie or sporting event.
- (d) Offering to pay for a pizza or DVD rental\



Whatever approach is used, it must be perceived as sincere, valuable and not manipulative.

#8. Consider implementing regular Family Meetings. These meetings are for discussing issues that the family is dealing with; allocating fairly and equitably the chores and other duties that must get done; giving everyone in the family an opportunity to voice concerns as well as a voice in the running of the household;

develops the sense of the family being a unit – a whole – that has to work together if it is going to function as family.

#9. Write a CONTRACT. Something to consider is actually writing and signing a contract with your teen that spells out such things as: agreed to chores (who takes out the garbage; who vacuums; who cleans the bathrooms etc.); curfew hours; home work schedule; Computer time allotments; the agreed to “Rules” that govern the functioning of your home (bed-times, meal-times); acceptable and unacceptable behavior; and penalties for breaking the contract as well as rewards or benefits for abiding with the contract. The Contract should **define such crucial terms** as: What is Mutual Respect (and Disrespect) (Child to Parent & Parent To Child); What Constitutes (Unconditional) Love – Expressions of; Schedule for Review of the Contract; and a Schedule for Regular Family Meetings.



You must **THEN BE CONSISTENT IN APPLYING DISCIPLINE** and in adhering to the contract. But there must also be some willingness to be flexible and be open to negotiate. The idea is to live to the intent of the contract wording and not the letter of the wording. The latter leads to “legalism”, which in turn can snuff-out any love in a family.



#10. Offer Help – Find Help. It may be necessary to locate self-help aids, and perhaps professional counseling that helps your teen develop better study habits, and time management skills as well as providing opportunity to express and discuss their thoughts and feelings.



IN SUMMARY it comes down to this: Your teen has to demonstrate that he or she can be trusted, and you as a parent have to risk trusting. Trusting comes by demonstrating that we are “trustworthy”. This means we keep our commitments, live up to our promises, and generally keep our “word”. So, in some respects, we too – as the parent – have to show that we can be trusted, that we will keep our promises, which includes being consistent in our manner of disciplining : keeping our word with respect to rewarding good behavior, acknowledging efforts ever so small by our children, and also punishing unwanted or undesirable behavior.



For families, these basics should be built on a foundation of “love”, a relationship in which we feel accepted and secure independent of our behavior and accomplishments. The Bible stresses that at the heart of any set of rules or law is really “Love”. The rules are there for our own protection and put there out of concern for our welfare. However, loving behavior does not mean condoning unacceptable, self-destructive behavior. In the contrary, if we truly love someone, we desire the best for them and we are obligated to point out when they are engaging in behaviors that are self-sabotaging, self-limiting and likely to have long-term negative implications in their life. But, having done so, we must then back off, let them make their choices and allow them to experience the consequences – good or bad. It may pain us and it may hurt them, or yet again they may surprise you and succeed beyond your dreams. But they nonetheless have to experience life in order to grow. It is always best to do this simple reflective exercise: **THINK BACK TO WHEN YOU WERE A TEENAGER : DID YOU ALWAYS LISTEN TO YOUR PARENTS??** And you turned out okay, didn’t you?



FURTHER TACTICS FOR PARENTING DIFFICULT TEENS

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Taken from *Parenting Your Out-of-Control Teenager* by Scott Sells
St.Martin's Griffin, 2001, with material drawn from *Insight Counseling* experience.

Tactic #1 Know Your Hot Buttons

Following are 10 things your teen may say that are likely to be hot-buttons to you as parent and adult. Your teen may say them intentionally, because of your reaction or simply because they are in opposition to your values and represent a move toward independence. Keep in mind that what is said in anger is generally hurtful spiteful and exaggerated.

As the adult it is incumbent upon you to control your temper, model mature ways of handling conflict, and never respond in a manner that infers rejection or links love and acceptance to performance.

1. **You Never Let Me Know Do Anything!** The intention of this statement is to imply that you are over-controlling and mistrusting. It is also intended to steer you away from the real issue, prey on self-doubt and create feelings of guilt.
2. **You Don't Love Me!** The implication here is that a truly loving parent has few rules and restrictions. This of course reflects the naive, egocentric; pleasure seeking world view of the teen combined their misunderstanding of parental love and parental responsibility and duty of care which carries legal implications.
3. **I Hate This Family! I Hate You!** Statements like these are meant to cause you lose your temper and hence cloud your judgment as well as throw you off topic.
4. **Swearing and Verbal Abuse.** This tactic is akin to the military strategy of Shock and Awe or Blitzkrieg. Make much noise and intimidate.
5. **You're Not My Real Parent. You Can't Tell Me What To Do.** This is tactic used against step-parents. It hurts and it is frustrating. It is a statement hard to refute if you are the step-parent because you are not their real, biological parent. For this reason, parents of blended parents must agree on the parental authority of the step-parent, and never undermine it. There must also be consistent discipline and rules between households where joint custody exists.
6. **Disrespectful Looks, Gestures and Mimicking.** As with adults, body language and tone of voice can speak volumes. If you take teenage barbs personally it gives your son or daughter an upper hand. Just knowing these nonverbal cues and verbal cues annoy you gives the teen an edge
7. **I'm going to Kill Myself/ Others/ You.** This is a strategy of intimidation and emotional blackmail. Where a teen has exhibited serious depression and/or antisocial, delinquent behavior such threats should be taken seriously and professional help sought. Suicide attempts are a cry for help

- and attention. Teens that have never shown such tendencies are most likely being melodramatic.
8. **Lying:** Trust is the basis of relationship. For a true relationship to exist the parties to the relationship have to know that each can be counted on keep their word. Trust is earned by demonstrating that one is trustworthy. Telling half-truths and outright lies erodes trust. Some Teens seem to have difficulty grasping this concept. They will bend rules break curfews, fail in their commitments to do specific chores, and yet expect to be trusted. This of course flows two ways. As the parent-the adult- we must model this concept by keeping our promises.
 9. **I Hate School.** School is frequently a contentious topic. If a son or daughter is not the studious, intellectual type, it is often difficult for them to remain interested, especially if they are not doing well and are struggling with certain subjects. Not everyone is meant for university. In fact some skilled trades pay better than a teaching degree. Consider taking your teen's threat seriously and suggest he or she explore a trade or technical school.
 10. **I'm Going To Run Away.** Like suicide, running away can be used as emotional blackmail. It may or may not be a hollow threat. It is best to have a serious talk to avert such a threat and a strategy should your teen follow through.

Tactic #2 Know Your Teenager's Hot Buttons

According to Scott Sells the following five items are hot-buttons for most teens.

1. **Constant Preaching, Nagging and Clichés.** Lecturing, especially with references do when you were that age, typically is ineffective. Most teens can't relate and will simply shut you out
2. **Installment Talking &/or Lecturing.** This occurs when you make statements like these: 'I tell you every week; How many times do we have to go over this? The content is usually negative and the focus always some failing. It is usually better to stay wit present and address each situation as a first occurrence.
3. **Negative Labeling and Negative Generalizations.** Avoid "You always" statements, especially those that focus on shortcomings and failures. Again address only the present, focusing on the current issue you wish to rectify or highlight.
4. **Negative Factorizing.** Like negative labeling, negative futurizing focuses on shortcomings and failings. However, it goes one step further and assumes they'll persist into the future only to become worse or at least be handicap in the future Typical futurizing statements are: 'You'll never get into college' ; 'You're going to be nothing but bum.' etc. These can actually be taken to heart by your son or daughter resulting in them self-limiting , falling short of their potential and confirming your predictions Deep down your no doubt knows that school and grades are important. It is possible that there are legitimate learning difficulties that your son or

daughter is ashamed to bring up. Secondly, drug and alcohol use is real risk that you need to discuss.

5. **Instant Problem- Solving.** Sometimes when you're teen comes to you with a problem they are looking more to talk and toss around ideas rather than get a solution from you. This is a good opportunity to encourage self-initiative and practice decision making. It is also an opportunity to strengthen your communication links.

Tactic #3 Winning Respect

Both parent and teen value respect. Shows of disrespect on the part of the teen are simply another attempt at asserting independence. It is a juvenile effort at trying to relate as equals as well as challenging parental authority. There is also an element of simply being unaware that certain behaviors are disrespectful. After all how often have you sighed and rolled your eyes when some one has made demands of you that you perceive to be unreasonable ire annoying? So here are some suggestions:

1. Clearly define- in writing- what you mean by disrespectful behavior.
2. Have clearly understood consequences for showing disrespect. A graduated hierarchy increasingly tougher penalties is suggested, ranging from grounding to loss of privileges.
3. Be consistent in applying the penalties.
4. Consider balancing the penalty system with reward points system that recognizes appropriate behavior, self- initiative, and the like.
5. Never link love and acceptance, or family membership to behavior.

Remember respect is something that is earned – not demanded or commanded. As the adult we have to act in ways that gain respect, just as we expect the same from our teenage son or daughter.

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