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INTRODUCTION

ANGER CAN BE USEFUL

Four-year-old Vanessa is lying on her bed, kicking her legs wildly. She's crying and shouting that she doesn't want to wear tights. Each time I try to wrangle her into the impossibly small tights, she pulls her foot away. She gets more and more angry, and I'm more and more stressed. The clock is ticking. My first meeting at work is in 45 minutes. We have to get going. But none of this matters to Vanessa. She could not care less about my work meeting. She fights me off every time I come close. I start to get a bit more forceful, more than I feel comfortable with; I'm holding her as I try desperately to shove both legs into the tights at the same time. She screams furiously. Finally, I tear off her half-pulled-up tights, throw them down on the bed beside her, and scream: "If you do not put those tights on right now, you are going to GET IT!"

And there it is. I'm desperate to disappear from the whole situation. I can't bear to look at my frightened little girl. I want to turn back the clock. But even though I'm ashamed, I'm still angry at her. *She* has put *me* in this impossible situation by being so stubborn. If she would just behave, then I wouldn't have to get so angry. I want it to be her fault. In fact, I don't want to feel anything, and I don't want to think any more about what happened. Now it's just about getting us moving and out of the house. "Okay, Vanessa, you don't have to

wear tights to kindergarten today. If you come right now, you can have a snack on the way. I've got blueberry muffins."

Anger in children is challenging and exhausting. A child's anger can lead to a lot of painful moments for parents. In our work as therapists, we once met a father who smashed his son's iPad in frustration over the fact that the boy wouldn't get ready for bed. One mother sat in our office and told us that, in a moment of utter desperation, she had turned to her daughter—who was having a tantrum and who had hit her 6-month-old sister—and said, "I wish you'd never been born!" We have counseled parents who have collapsed in tears and fled the house after their child threatened them with a knife, parents who have thrown the remote control at their child in an attempt to get their attention, and parents who have threatened to ground their child for a year after he barricaded himself in his room in anger and refused to go to school for the sixth day in a row. We have met parents who've had to place their violent children in institutions and parents who have been so afraid of their angry adult children that they cut off contact with them. We've talked to parents who have divorced because it's been so difficult to cope with their child's anger while also handling each other's different reactions and strategies.

As parents, we worry, and we sometimes say and do things in desperation that we would never have imagined possible before we had children. It is a massive challenge to be faced with an angry child, a rude and sullen adolescent, or a shut-down and silent adult child still living under our roof. These situations bring up a bunch of emotions for us as parents. We can feel despair and desperation when a child refuses to do what we ask. We can go from feeling frustration to feeling furious. We can even feel hatred toward our child. We can cringe with shame when they behave badly in front of others, and we can feel fear that they will never "grow out of" their bad behavior. Then more shame and despair set in because we

haven't been able to find the thing that works to help them and to set our family on a better path.

The feeling that we have failed in our role as caregiver is a heavy burden to carry, and that feeling does not make us better parents. We're exhausted with worry. We feel powerless when strife or even violence has become almost a norm in our home. We feel a pervasive sadness, which has crept into the chasm between us and our children. All these emotions affect our behavior. They cause us to pull away from our children, to cry, to criticize, or to use force and, for example, grab them roughly by the arm. But these painful feelings, although they lead to behaviors that aren't good for us or for our kids, can actually be helpful.

WAIT—ANGER CAN BE HELPFUL?

Emotions give us information about what we need. We can listen to our emotions and use them in a way that helps us get our needs met. With new information, and a deeper understanding of our own feelings and reactions and those of our child, emotions can help us understand what we and our child need. *Use* your discomfort, shame, guilt, and sadness. Draw strength from these feelings so that, the next time you are faced with your angry or aggressive young child, your furious teenager, or your dismissive adult child, you can do something different. The most important thing is not what happens, it's what happens next! It is never too late to repair a relationship, and it's never too late to meet your child's feelings in a new way.

Anger is incredibly difficult to deal with. Angry children are difficult to deal with. It's exhausting to deal with constant blow-ups, especially when parents are overloaded with a million other things to get done in a day. When a child is angry and aggressive, parents can also begin to worry about the child's future: "What's going on with them?" "I'm afraid they'll end up in jail." "She'll never

make friends.” “Doesn’t he have any empathy?” “Is she just a little psychopath?”

To make things more complicated, anger never comes alone as a single feeling. A child can alternate between being angry and sad and between being angry and ashamed. Anger and laughter can even occur together. But our own emotional reaction happens despite the fact that, under their anger, our child may be hurting. When we are already stretched beyond our limit, we react to their anger by getting angry ourselves. We can then end up criticizing, ridiculing, or rejecting the child, or just giving up. Our child’s anger can also lead us to despair. It is painful to watch your child struggle. It’s no wonder it can be hard to cope with an angry child when our heads are filled with worst-case scenarios.

The key lies in knowing more about how anger works and understanding that behind aggressive behavior often lie feelings of vulnerability. An angry child is often a child who is embarrassed, ashamed, or disappointed or who feels small, stupid, or “not enough.” A child’s anger can be an expression of sadness, loneliness, or fear. You, as the adult, need to be aware of what feelings their intense anger can evoke in you, and you need help figuring out how you can work with your own feelings—feelings that can keep you from doing the vital work of being emotionally present for your child.

Anger is the emotion in children that creates the greatest level of frustration in caregivers. Anger, along with shame, is the most misunderstood feeling. Anger has gotten a very bad rap; it often has only negative connotations, associated with aggression and violence, and is considered undesirable overall. Who hasn’t heard a million times, “You don’t need to be so angry!”

This book shines a light on anger and reminds people why it is an important and essential emotion. Anger has a crucial social role, allowing us to create boundaries and defend ourselves. Without anger, life would be very problematic. Without anger, others could

do what they wanted to us and to what is ours: run us down, invade and rob us. We'd be defenseless without a healthy dose of anger!

I JUST WANT MY CHILD TO BEHAVE

Understanding your child's anger is all well and good, but at the end of the day most parents want their kids to behave. How can we get them to stop yelling at us or acting out? How can we get those tights on our daughter so that we can get to work on time and not end up acting either like Godzilla-Mom or like a total doormat with zero boundaries?

This process starts with understanding. Parents can learn to handle children who are aggressive or violent by understanding more fully what anger actually is. Just as important, they can learn what to do when things still (despite the parent's new learning) go completely off the rails—because that *is* going to happen, regardless of how much information and knowledge we have about emotions and child rearing. It is possible to get through the catastrophically bad days with our self-respect, and our relationship with our child, intact. This is even possible for parents whose children react with anger in almost any and all challenging situations. What does a child who is making threats and giving you the evil eye actually need? And how can parents who have almost completely given up regain faith in their ability to handle their child's anger?

This book gives you all you need to know about your children's anger and aggression—the good, the bad, and the ugly. We'll show you how anger can help you stand up for yourself, create healthy boundaries, and protect yourself against situations that are unfair or threatening. We'll also show you ways to respond when your child's anger shows up as rage, sharp criticism, intimidation, hate, screaming, biting, punching, and kicking. By helping your child understand and verbalize their needs, you can help them grow and

strengthen their self-control and assertiveness. This will help them be better equipped to handle their anger in the future.

This book is *not* about giving your child whatever they want, and it is *not* about allowing aggressive behavior. We'll teach you a new approach to maintaining healthy boundaries that will allow you to set limits effectively while also understanding your child's emotions. The newsflash is that understanding emotions—your own and your child's—is the key that will help you rock the limit-setting.

This book is for all parents who would like to understand more about their child's anger and their own relationship with anger. Not all parents have children who are particularly angry, but all parents have children with a nervous system, a stomach, and a brain that can experience anger. This book is therefore not only for the parents of “angry kids” but also for parents who are simply curious to learn more about how to help their child develop a good relationship with anger. This book is for all parents who like to read and are hungry for knowledge.

THE APPROACH WE TAKE

We, the authors, are psychologists with many years' experience working with children, parents, and families. We specialize in a counseling model called *emotion focused skills training* (EFST; Dolhanty et. al., 2022), which is based on the emotion-focused therapy model developed by Leslie Greenberg. EFST is a method whereby, instead of us jumping in to “treat” your child, we focus on supporting and guiding you, the parent. We believe you are the best one to help your child with their emotional and behavioral difficulties. We use the bond you have with your kids (and, if that bond is bent or broken, we help you repair it), and we teach you, so that you can teach them, ways to deal with emotional difficulties and solve problems. Lots of research shows that this way of working with families and emotions

is effective (Ansar et al., 2021; Foroughe et al., 2018; Havighurst et al., 2015; Lafrance Robinson et al., 2013). The most important study of EFST showed that it makes a big difference in children's symptoms of anxiety and depression and behavioral difficulties (Ansar et al., 2022).

Joanne is the original founder of EFST for parents, and Anne Hilde has been a close collaborator in developing the approach. Although both of us have trained hundreds of parents and professionals in the method, this is our first book written for everyday parents. We hope to help you regain faith in yourself so that you can help your angry child to live in harmony with their emotions.

After helping hundreds of families, we know that massive change can occur when parents delve into understanding their children's emotions and when they genuinely convey to their child that "Your feelings are valid." It may sound banal and easy to say, "Of course you feel the way you do, because . . .," but this isn't easy to *do* when you're standing in front of a 5-year-old who smashes her toy to the floor, saying no one will play with her, or a 10-year-old who angrily yells that he hates his teacher and refuses to go to school. When feelings are acknowledged and allowed to function as intended, children learn that their emotions give them important information and help them to get what they need. This kind of emotional competence will change behavior, thoughts, and relationships. However, it isn't the behavior or thoughts that we want to help parents target. The goal in EFST, and of this book, is for parents not only to help their children feel better but also to help their children get better at feeling—both the painful and the pleasant feelings.

This book will also help you relate differently to your own feelings as well as to those of your child. We will help you regain your faith in yourself, knowing that you are the best person to help your children. Like all parents, you need to forgive yourself for any past mistakes. You need to quiet your inner critic and get in

touch with your own old, unmet emotional needs and fears that are competing for attention and that can interfere with parenting (Greenberg, 2002).

EFST is an *experience-based* method, which means that parents learn not only by acquiring knowledge but also through practice, experiences, and being emotionally activated during the learning process (Greenberg et al., 2007; Greenberg & Goldman, 2019). Therefore, the chapters in this book include experience-based exercises that can help you, in addition to reading the book, of course. These exercises each begin with the heading “Experience It.” We urge you to put in the effort to complete them. They’ll help you get to know your own emotions as well as connect you to your child’s. They also will help you learn on a deeper level than simply reading the text will. It’s worth the time and effort because, with emotion, “You gotta feel it if you want to deal with it.”

The book is divided into three parts. The chapters in Part I examine anger as an emotion: What is anger, how does the feeling work, and when does it become a problem? Part II teaches you how to respond to your child’s anger with empathy. This includes empathically validating their anger (but not their misbehavior!) and, if necessary, helping them problem solve. You will learn how to manage your own emotions as you deal with your child’s anger as well as how to apologize when it is necessary to repair the relationship. Finally, the chapters in Part III teach you how to create and set healthy and flexible limits.