

## **Part 3 - A Peaceful Home – Staying Calm and Avoiding Anger**

### **Searching for Peace**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every day of family life was cheerful and relaxed? If our children would always do what they were told (the first time they were told?) And what if we could meet every single adversity with a calm, clear head, and then always make the right decisions? As lovely as that sounds, we know that it would be impossible for life to be such a never-ending bowl full of bliss and cherries. As they say, along with cherries come the pits. Anger is an unsightly pit, but it is impossible to avoid it during the child-rearing years.

Family life is complicated and unpredictable. Day-to-day expectations and responsibilities can create angry emotions in both parents and children. No matter how skilled you are at parenting, no matter how wonderful your children are, you cannot eliminate or avoid the unpleasant situations that occur in all families. However, once you understand where the anger comes from, and learn ways to control your reactions, then anger can occupy a smaller place in your home, one that is manageable and reasonably contained.

### **Anger – The Shame and the Secret**

Our children are so lovable, innocent and treasured. They bring us incredible joy with just a smile. They love us with their entire being. And we love them with an intensity that is unique to the parent-child relationship – we'd stand in front of a bus to protect our children, and we'd do it

without a second thought. Yet, these same precious children can bring out the worst in us. There are times when they make us so angry that we yell, threaten, condemn, withdraw or even grab, push, slap, or hit. Afterwards, we suffer:

Mother-Speak:

“How do I feel after an angry outburst? I feel guilty, sad, ashamed, embarrassed, disgusted and depleted. I am flooded with negative self talk, anguish, worry, and often, tears. I feel like I've damaged my children. I feel that I am a horrible person and a failure as a Mum. Every time it happens I promise myself I won't do it again. Yet I do.”

Mother of two

The ferocity and intensity of our anger at our children confuses and frightens us. We think that our actions are wrong, yet we don't know how to control them, and so it happens again and again. Each time, we suffer shame and embarrassment over our actions. We don't want to talk about what we did, nor admit that we acted in such a harsh way towards our child. We rationalize, excuse, and blame. And then we suffer in silence. You may think you are the only one to ever get so unbelievably angry at your own child, and you may feel no one else reacts in such an uncontrolled manner. But I am here to tell you that you are not alone. Far from it. It is likely that every single parent in the entire world, since the beginning of the human race, has erupted in anger at their child, and has done it more than once. And even more than twice...

Anger is as common to parenting as changing diapers. We don't worry about the diapers, and we change them as necessary. However, few of us handle our anger well, and we worry about it overmuch. The good news is that we *can* learn how to manage and control our anger.

Being a parent can be the most wonderful experience of a lifetime. Yet, raising children is also one of the most complicated, time-consuming, energy-draining, and challenging tasks you will ever encounter, and anger is a natural outcome of the intensity of the work. Parents who try the hardest to do their best are the ones beset by the most remorse after episodes of anger. So, before we proceed to learn how to understand and control your anger, I'd like to give you permission to abolish the shame and guilt -- rest assured -- anger happens to everyone; no parent is immune.

Even though anger at our children is normal and common, it clearly stands in the way of effective parenting. It prevents us from making the right decisions, and it doesn't help us to teach the lessons we want our children to learn. Anger influences how we think, how we behave and how we live our day-to-day lives. It creates stress and unhappiness for us, and for our children. Unresolved and uncontrolled anger can even grow and evolve into a pattern of behavior that could be potentially dangerous, both emotionally and physically.

The good news is that you can have more control over your emotional states. Once you understand where the anger comes from, and once you learn specific steps to handle your anger, you will find that it will be a less-intense and less-frequent occurrence in your home, leaving room for positive, effective parenting and loving communication between you and your children.

Mother-speak

“I was always great at keeping my cool. I walk away from arguments with my husband because I don't like being angry. I prefer cooling down and talking about it later, another day, or not at all. But, you can't do that with a child, you have to deal with the situation. And, as a consequence, you've got to deal with your anger right now, too, but I'm not sure how to do that. I'm still learning, and every time I get angry, I get embarrassed and ashamed. I'm glad to know that it's normal, both to get angry and also to feel the shame. Perhaps that will alleviate some of the pressure the next time I have to deal with a tantrum.”

Cristina, mother to Maïa, age 3 and Solanne, 20 months

### **Why Do Parents Get Angry at Their Children?**

It can help to identify the reasons that we get angry at our children. Understanding the underlying causes of anger can be the first step in gaining control of our angry feelings and moving toward prevention and solutions. Let's examine some of the most common sources of parental anger:

***Reason for parental anger: Raising children is a difficult, complex job that's ever-changing.***

Parenting is a complicated job. It is never-ending: 24-hours, seven days a week, with very few coffee breaks and no vacations. Even when our children are not with us they often consume our thoughts and energy. It seems we must handle the same problem repeatedly, yet never really solve it. Furthermore, as we master each new stage in our child's development, or as we finally

solve the current childrearing problem, we turn around to find yet another new issue is close on its heels. Any job of this magnitude would invite myriad emotions – including anger.

To make this even more complicated, parenting isn't our only job. Our days are also filled with many other obligations that take up our time and energy, putting even more stress on our shoulders, which causes us to be more short-tempered with our children.

***Reason for parental anger: Lack of adequate training.***

Although parenting is a difficult, complex job, it doesn't come with clear instructions. Even if you read parenting books or take classes, every child responds in unique ways and family issues change from day to day. So no matter how prepared you are, it's still all on-the-job training -- and the job keeps changing! Because of this, we can never fully "master" parenting, so we often feel like we're chasing a moving target. Our lack of training for the enormous task can make us insecure and cause us to feel helpless. When trying to force things to go the way we think they should, it can lead us to anger.

Mother-speak

"Up until a few months ago I always had control over every aspect of Hannah's life. It was only when she started rebelling that it became clear that she indeed was a separate human being from me with her own set of ideas, preferences and opinions! Today was the first time it hit me that this shift in behavior and attitude wasn't just about what she wanted to wear or her refusing to listen to me, it was about her starting to be her own person. I think a part of my anger was that I was no longer able to control "all things Hannah." It was me being in denial that she is a totally

different person from me and that she will most likely be a different person than *I expect and want* her to be. Looks like someone forgot to tell me that when they cut that umbilical cord it meant that at some point down the line (2.5 years to be exact) that she would start to become a person that I would have less and less control over, and who I'd have to trust would make good choices for herself using the tools that have been taught to her. That brings tears to my eyes...partly because I see there is a part of me that doesn't want to believe that one day she *will* fly on her own, when she won't need me as much, and partly because I wish I would have recognized that months ago when my anger and frustration were at its peak.

The first half of Hannah's twos were a piece of cake, I didn't understand what the big fuss about the terrible two's was all about! Not that Hannah was a perfect angel but still...this second half of the two's has been...hmm... let's say difficult and interesting. All of a sudden my sweet little girl who always did as she was told and never had a tantrum transformed into a little diva who did what she wanted to do and that was that! The moving target you mentioned was so dead on. I felt like just when I mastered something and got a hold of a bad behavior she would change things up and I'd end up flailing! I don't believe in spanking but I have come really close a couple of times, and that really upset me.

It helps to see the "whys" behind the anger, and it has made a big difference already. I am able to stop myself quicker and ask myself where the anger is coming from, and remind myself of her immersing independence – and that it is really a good thing. ”

Kia, mother to Hannah, age 2 1/2

***Reason for parental anger: Lack of support.***

In days past, families were larger, and people tended to stay in the same area their entire lives. Therefore, young parents had grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings and friends close by to help them in their new role as a parent. When a problem occurred there were many people to turn to for help. With today's much smaller family units and increased mobility, extended family members don't live close by; they may even live on different continents. Frequent moves mean that close friendships are harder to maintain.

In addition, many families are headed or managed by one parent only, leaving that person the entire responsibility of all parenting and household duties, in addition to the added burden of financially supporting the family. This lack of support and added pressure opens the door to the possibility of much more stress and anger.

**Mother-Speak**

“Today's parents have pressure on them to function as great parents without the necessary "scaffolding" to do the job. They lack support, experienced advice, and people just being there to call on. It can be a lonely and difficult job.”

Jane, mother of Isla, age 5 and Willow, age 3

***Reason for parental anger: Frustration, confusion and disappointment.***

Because of that moving target we just talked about, things in the household don't always go smoothly or according to plan. We can attempt to use every parenting skill in our repertoire, we can have well-planned routines, we can be thoughtful and even wise, yet we can still end up with

children who don't do what we want them to do. This can lead us to feel confused and frustrated – *Why won't my child behave? Why on earth can't I get a handle on this?* It can also cause us to be disappointed in our children and in ourselves as parents. All these negative emotions can easily lead to anger.

We further pump up the volume on our anger with emotional tunnel vision: We see, hear and understand nothing beyond that which is creating our anger, thus magnifying it beyond actual proportion, and building our frustration, confusion and disappointment into a mountain too big to move.

***Reason for parental anger: Unrealistic expectations.***

There are three situations where expectations can become out of sync with real life. The first of these is our overall vision for family life. Parents often begin painting a picture of *family* in their mind's eye before their child is even born. During pregnancy or the adoption process parents will daydream about their future family. This daydreaming focuses on the expected joys of parenthood and rarely includes the unpleasant or mundane – which make up a significant part of real life. Reality often begins to take a sharp turn away from expectations right from the start – a rough birth, postpartum blues, a delayed adoption, sleepless nights, a colicky baby, and so on.

Another area where expectations go awry has to do with daily discipline and behavior situations. Although we've seen a multitude of children throwing tantrums in our lifetime, although we've witnessed kids talking back to their parents, though we know that children fuss and whine and fight, and even though we've *been* a child who misbehaved, we somehow have in our

subconscious mind the expectation that *my child will be different*. We think that if we love our child enough that he'll always love us back by being *good*. So when our child has a whopper of a tantrum, throws food on the floor or purposely breaks rules, we are thrown by the vast difference between our expectations and reality.

Mother-speak:

“When my oldest was two I was pregnant with number two. One day, we went out for a walk and she insisted on bringing her riding toy. The only place for her to ride was a good ten minute walk from our apartment, so I told her that I would let her bring it – on the condition that she RIDE the whole time and that I didn't have to carry it. Of course she said yes. Of course she rode the whole way there, and of course she got tired and refused to ride back. At this point I should have realized that I was expecting waaaaay too much of my little girl, but I was so absorbed with my own exhaustion that I got extremely annoyed at her. I picked up her toy and lectured her the entire way home about responsibility. Yes, I know, that's crazy. She was only two! But I did it anyway. I don't think any memory has ever made me feel quite so stupid before! I guess we really should keep our expectations of our children in step with reality, but in the moment that's not always easy to do.”

Elana, mother to Choshen, age 5, Maayan, age 3, and Shmuel, 5 months

The last of our skewed expectations has to do with our vision of how we should be as a parent. We often set high goals for ourselves without even being aware that we are doing so. These goals are created based on our views of our own parents and of our education through observation of other parents plus studies through reading or classes. We may have hated it when our parents

screamed at us, and vow to never, ever to the same. We may see other parents beg, threaten or bribe their children and *know* we would never react that way. We might wholeheartedly agree with the fundamentals of positive parenting techniques and plan to use rational, well-intentioned parenting skills to raise our children. Yet, there are times when we end up screaming, begging, threatening, bribing and failing miserably at the techniques we so totally believe in.

These discrepancies between expectation and reality create a cavern of space that is often unwittingly filled with anger. The larger the cavern, the more room there is for anger. In other words, the farther reality is from your expectation, the greater the chance that the gap will be filled with anger or other unpleasant emotions.

***Reason for parental anger: Life's irritations are misdirected.***

At times, the anger that we take out on our children has nothing whatsoever to do with them. We may have had an argument with our spouse, a bad day at work, a problem with our computer, or any number of other issues that annoy us. Along comes our child, acting out perhaps in the simplest way, but at the wrong time, and we release all our anger at our unsuspecting child. It's the "kick the cat" syndrome.

At other times, our child may indeed have misbehaved. The misbehavior triggers our anger-release button -- our child's behavior is added to the growing pile up of other angers, which exaggerate and distort our response. So, rather than having an appropriate reaction to the situation at hand, we explode with all our pent up anger from so many other issues.

Mother-speak:

“When I have my bad days I have to keep reminding myself not to take out my problems on my daughter. I keep telling myself it's really *my* mood that's the problem, more than my child's behavior. So I say this in my head over and over again "Do not take out your bad mood on Arianna.” It really helps on those bad days.”

Kristi, mother to Arianna 30 months

***Reason for parental anger: Anger is masking other emotions.***

Human beings are complex creatures. Our presenting emotions are not always what they seem to be. There are times when what we truly feel is hidden, but what escapes to the world is anger.

There are times when anger masks other emotions such as worry, fear, embarrassment, frustration, or helplessness, such when as when your child disappears at the grocery store (worry), runs into the street (fear), has a tantrum in public (embarrassment), continues his misbehavior no matter what we do (frustration) or is disrespectful and mean to others (helplessness.) The anger that erupts in these cases prevents us from acknowledging the painful emotions that are at the root of the situation, and can even be a disguised cry of distress.

Mother-speak:

“I think that anger is sometimes associated with our own fears of adequacy. I feel frustration and anger when my child misbehaves in public or around friends or family members. Sometimes it is so hard to handle a situation when you feel the stares of those around you. You fear what they are going to think of your parenting. Even though it shouldn't matter, many times it does.”

Anne-Marie, mother of Lindsey, age 4

***Reason for parental anger: It's a normal emotional response to problems.***

Human beings have a wide range of emotions and anger is one of them. To be human is to experience a flow of emotions in response to internal stimulus and external events. All people get angry. It is a natural, biological response to pain (physical or emotional), threats, and frustration. Anger inspires powerful, focused, single-minded behaviors which are necessary for people to defend themselves when they are in dangerous situations. At those times, anger is a necessary human survival mechanism. The problem, of course, is that anger is not perfectly selective; we get angry in situations that don't truly call for anger.

Your natural personality traits will also dictate how mad you get and how easily you are set off. Some people are more easily angered than others, and everyone handles their emotions differently. Some people shout, some strike out, some become irritable, some turn their anger inward as they simmer and sulk, or even become ill with headaches, stomachaches or worse.

Keep in mind also, that our moods affect our responses to our children. On a good day, when we're our mood is cheerful, a spilled cereal bowl is just a spill. On a difficult day, in a bad mood, it's an intentionally created disaster. We aren't perfect beings, and we should never expect perfection of ourselves, just as we shouldn't expect our children to be perfect angels every day.

Anger itself cannot be eliminated, nor need it be. Anger is not the real problem. The problem is in how we respond when we are angry.

We can learn to identify, manage and control our angry feelings so that our reactions don't escalate out of control and make situations worse than they already are. We can learn to use anger as a cue that something is wrong and needs to be changed. We can in fact turn angry emotions into a launching pad for practical problem solving.

***Reason for parental anger: Trying to NOT get angry.***

When your child throws an Olympic-sized tantrum at the shopping mall, paints on the sofa, spills juice on your computer or hits his baby sister, the natural, automatic and inevitable response is anger. Some people advise against hoarding anger and tell you to let it loose. Psychologists tell us that this is a dangerous belief as it can escalate anger and possibly lead to aggression. It also can prevent finding a solution to the real problem.

Instead of trying *not* to get angry – which is nearly impossible – or holding your anger in (which can backfire in other ways) it would be better to focus on *identifying* your emotions *and properly responding* to the situation at hand. In other words, the more you try not to be angry in anger-producing situations the more likely your emotions will explode out of control.

The goal is to develop and practice strategies that allow you to deal with your angry feelings in ways that protect other people and things, while leading you to the proper resolution for the problem.

***Reason for parental anger: Lack of anger management skills.***

It's possible that no one has ever taught you any specific skills for handling your anger constructively. It's not likely your parents taught you as a child, and it's not a class taught at school. Even worse, you may have learned poor anger management approaches from experiences with your own parents and other people who influenced your emotional growth. Children (and you were one, once) often copy the behavior of other people in their lives, and this applies to how they see angry emotions dealt with. Over time, what children observe becomes their own pattern of behavior, and will remain so, even up through adulthood, unless they take action to modify their normal responses.

Typically the only adults who take anger management classes are those who are in family or marriage therapy or those who are court-ordered to do so because of extreme anger problems. This is truly a shame, since every human being could benefit from learning anger management skills. Later in this chapter you will learn specific skills pertaining to controlling parental anger as well as tips on how to teach your children these valuable life skills.

One other point to keep in mind is that all people respond to tense situations differently, and we all have different "angry" personalities. Some people yell, others stomp, some sulk or escape from the person they are mad at. It can help to think about how you automatically respond when you are angry – what are your typical thoughts and actions? If you identify and understand what your automatic responses are, then you will have more power to change those actions.

Mother-speak:
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"If I am tired, hungry, rushed, or stressed out, I can't seem to call up even the simplest parenting technique and find any bit of childish behavior unbearable. I am likely to snap with orders and demands. I have even lashed out with a slap on a leg or hand, which has left me feeling horrified and dismayed with myself. Because this is so far from how I choose to parent, I find it very shameful and distressing, and of course I feel guilty and afraid that I have damaged our relationship or even damaged my child's psyche in some way. My own parents were not spankers, but when pushed to the limit my mom did reach out and pinch legs or buttocks. I can see myself reacting to irritation and frustration in the same way. So I guess I should be thankful that I had good parents who were not actually violent, as it must be very hard to break that cycle. It is very clear to me that violence and even anger do absolutely nothing to help my child, and they certainly don't help me, so I am eager to find more ways to control it. I wish I would have been taught how to express anger in a constructive way and then find a way to cool off and get on with things more positively."

Amy, mother to Amani, age 20 months

***Reason for parental anger: Self-neglect, pain or exhaustion.***

It's common for parents to be stressed and constantly busy. They tend to their children's needs with rarely a moment to themselves. They don't eat right, they don't exercise and they don't get enough sleep. While unaware of what is happening, this constant care-giving and self-neglect can build into a subconscious resentment and an unmet need for personal space. These buried emotions can be pushed to the surface, fueled by daily parenting frustrations; they can erupt in a moment of anger.

Busy parents must continue to function no matter how they feel. Tending to children, running a household and working a job keep us busy from sun up to sun down, and often throughout the night as well, tending to a sleepless child. Parents must push on through sleep-deprivation or pain, such as a headache, backache, head cold, symptoms of pregnancy, post-partum depression, or other discomforts. Human beings have a natural tendency to have a shorter fuse when dealing with their own physical problems.

Children, of course, don't understand or comprehend their parents' pains, so they continue with their normal whining, bickering or nagging, and push a suffering parent past patience. Even innocent, happy play that is noisy or rambunctious can trigger an angry response from a parent who is dealing with pain or exhaustion. Parents who are under the influence of drugs (both medications and recreational drugs) or alcohol will find their normal emotions to be skewed, which can result in angry responses.

Repeated episodes of uncalled for anger can result in inconsistent, confusing behavior which can interfere with good discipline practices and damage the parent-child relationship.

***Reason for parental anger: Lack of motivation to NOT get angry.***

You *can* control your anger. You *do* control your anger all the time. Don't believe me? Think of the times that you've been upset with a store clerk, a restaurant server, a superior at work, a neighbor, a government official, or the driver in the car in front of you, and how many times you swallow that anger and respond in a civilized manner. Think of times that your child misbehaved

but you held your anger because the situation occurred in public or in front of your boss, your mother-in-law, your minister, or your child's teacher. You were able to control your anger in all of these situations because there would be a social price to pay if you were to respond in angry ways. You might suffer damage to your reputation, embarrassment, shame, or worse, a fine or arrest.

When you get angry at your child, the worse thing that you perceive happening in return is your child's anger or tears. While this is never a desirable outcome, it's not enough to stop you in your tracks. This is not a conscious decision, but it happens, nonetheless.

Once you acknowledge that anger is not an ineffective parenting response, and that it can damage your relationship with your child, while other methods will actually bring positive long-term results, you will be more motivated to learn a method for controlling your outbursts. When that happens, you will learn, practice and adopt methods that prevent you from releasing your anger in favor of better, more effective responses.

***Reason for parental anger: Noise, disorganization, mess and general chaos***

Most of us have a picture in our mind of how we'd like our homes to run. We envision orderly belongings, smooth schedules and peaceful surroundings. (Should I add chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven?) The reality is that most of our homes have far more noise, mess and chaos than we would like. Often we live with it day after day after day while wishing it was different. Then, when the TV is blaring, the baby is crying, you trip over a stray toy, discover a broken

dish, or are startled by a loud and annoying screech, all your unhappiness comes pouring out at once.

Father-speak:

“Bad day at work, sales calls, things breaking, noise, headache... it all leads to stress that leads to ARGHHHHH!”

Alan, father to Leanne, age 3 and Timothy, 5 months

It can help to know and accept that while there are children in your house it will never make the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Decide on what's most important, set a routine, and relax your standards to protect your sanity. When your children grow up and leave the nest then your house will look exactly the way you'd like: clean, neat and organized. And you'll miss them so much you'll wonder why you ever made such a big deal over the clutter.

***Reason for parental anger: Children are childish.***

Children are inexperienced, naïve and narcissistic. They have limited knowledge about social rules and expected behavior. Furthermore, they are separate people from us and they have free will. As hard as you may try, you cannot *make* a child eat, sleep, pick up his toys, say please, or go potty. You can *ask*, you can *nag*, *plead*, *threaten* and *beg*, but your child is a separate human being and functions independently from you. Children are not wise, rational or mature. They want to do what they want to do, and they don't give much thought to the past, the future, or how their actions affect other people or things.

Children don't always understand things the way we assume that they do. We might think that they have learned a lesson, or we might assume that they clearly understand a request, but many times they *don't get it*. This can be very frustrating to parents who think that something is clear as a bell, yet their child is going off in an entirely different direction.

We can't force children to be less childish, and we can't hurry the process of their growing up. And if we think about it, we wouldn't want to, because the same limits that frustrate us bring us the most joy – watching our child's joyful, unrestrained approach to the world is endearing. However, when this juvenile existence means that our children don't, won't or can't do the things we want them to do, and we can't find a way to *make them* do it, then parental anger is the inevitable result.

**Wow! That's a lot of reasons for parental anger!**

Now that you've learned the many, many reasons that parents get angry, you may begin to wonder how you ever get through a day without being angry! It is a major feat to stay calm in light of the many plates we must juggle and the many negative issues that are thrown our way. So, yes, give yourself a pat on the back for every issue that you handle with aplomb. And now, let's begin building your knowledge and your anger management skills up so that you'll know exactly what to do next time you find yourself getting angry with your child.

## Different Levels of Anger

“Anger” is a term that defines a broad range of emotions from mild irritation to rage. Not all of these emotions are bad or dangerous. Less intense emotions can act as a motivation to seek change and an impetus to problem solving actions. Lesser degrees of angry emotions keep us focused and keep our children “on their toes.” These emotions, such as displeasure or irritation, can allow us to see that a problem exists, but they don’t thwart control over our actions. As emotions become more extreme, though, they become harder to control and are more likely to result in uncontrolled reactions with no positive outcome.

A raised voice is not necessarily a bad thing – if it is controlled and respectful.

One problem with anger is that if you don’t have control over your emotions at the start you can unintentionally escalate from mild anger to more extreme emotions and bypass the point where you can use your emotions in a positive way. In addition, the angrier the parent gets, the more out of control the child gets – it’s as if they are on two sides of a rolling snowball heading for a crash at the bottom of the mountain. An escalating range of angry emotions might look like this:

Level 1 -	Level 2 -	Level 3 -	Level 4 -	Level 5 -	Level 6 -
Displeasure	Annoyance	Irritation	Exasperation	Rage	Fury

Parental anger often starts out on the mild end of the scale of emotion and can build to an uncontrollable crescendo. Let’s see how this happens:

<b>Child's action</b>	<b>Parent's action</b>	<b>Parents Emotion</b>
Plays with toys	Notes that it is bed time – asks child to put toys away <i>“Time to get ready for bed.”</i>	Calm
Plays with toys, hears but ignores parent	Notes child's inaction, repeats request <i>“Didn't you hear me? Put your toys away.”</i>	Displeased
Puts one toy away, but brings out two more and begins to play with them	Sees time is getting later, sees child still playing, pleads with child <i>“Get busy! Time to clean up!”</i>	Annoyed
Complains, begs for more playtime	Demands obedience <i>“Do it NOW!”</i>	Irritated
Whines and fusses	Raises voice, threatens punishment <i>“Just stop whining and clean up or no story time!”</i>	Exasperated (Upset)
Falls to floor crying, ignoring toys scattered	Yells at child, begins to throw toys in toy box	Rage-filled

around him	<i>“Why can’t you just do what I say!! You make me so mad!”</i>	
Grabs toys out of toy box, stomps feet, and cries	Loses control, spansks child and drags him to his bedroom while shouting at him  <i>“I am tired of this! Get to bed, NOW!”</i>	Furious
Child cries to sleep in bed feeling unloved and confused	Parent feels frustrated, guilty and ashamed	Aftermath

You can see how emotions can escalate between parent and child. Parents can avoid this escalation when they learn how to identify anger at the more mild levels and make precise choices about how to respond to the angry feelings. Going one step further, parents can also learn how to communicate to the child in ways that encourage cooperation. Before we move on to those skills, we’ll examine *why* and *how* angry emotions grow in their intensity.

### **Your Anger – Do You Accidentally Make Things Worse?**

Many parents unwittingly feed and grow their anger. As anger begins to grow inside us it prevents rational thoughts – it shuts off the thinking part of your brain. The thoughts that begin to

run rampantly through your head are inaccurate and irrational and based on mistaken beliefs. We view situations as final and definitive, and see our child's actions as intentionally bad, rather than seeing what's happening as part of the natural process of raising children.

Let's examine some of the common mistaken beliefs and negative thoughts that cause our angry emotions to spiral out of control. And then we'll adjust the belief to reflect a more accurate way of thinking.

***Mistaken belief: My children should not ever misbehave, so when they do they make me angry.***

You probably read that sentence and thought, "*Well, of course that's not true!*" Your rational, calm state of mind allows you to understand that. However, when you are in the midst of an episode of misbehavior you may shake your head in bafflement at your child's actions and wonder what is wrong with him, or what's wrong with you. In reality, there is nothing wrong with him, or with you, either. Children misbehave. Parents have the job of teaching their child how to behave appropriately. If children were born knowing how to behave in all situations they wouldn't need parents, would they?

Here is the unexpected and hidden concept behind the second half of this mistaken belief – that when our children misbehave they *make us angry*. It is *not* our child's misbehavior that makes us angry, because a child's actions cannot *make* you feel or do *anything*. You are in control of your feelings and your actions. Therefore, you actually allow the anger to formulate. You create your own anger by the way you interpret your child's behavior. You're not alone here, as this is the

foundation for much parental anger. Here's an important first step to anger control: You must accept responsibility for your own anger.

My child's misbehavior does not cause my anger. I create anger by my interpretation of the behavior and with my response to that interpretation.

You may find that learning more about child development, and what behaviors are normal at your child's age, it will help you to avoid labeling actions as misbehavior when they are actually age-appropriate behavior. There are plenty of books available about normal child development. They outline typical and expected behaviors and describe usual characteristics of certain age groups. You can also learn what's normal by talking with parents who have children close in age to your own, by reading parenting magazines, or by talking over your concerns with your pediatrician or family health care provider.

By understanding normal development, you may even be able to avoid the problem altogether, at times. As an example, if you know that young children are prone to temper tantrums when they are tired and hungry, and your child has a melt-down thirty minutes before dinner on the day that he misses his nap, you can identify the cause and understand the resulting behavior. This doesn't mean that you'll accept or ignore the behavior, but you will find it easier to handle than if you interpret the act as your child's personality problem or a deficiency in your parenting skills. And furthermore, you may be able to sometimes prevent it from happening.

***Mistaken belief: I shouldn't have to repeat myself over and over again on the same issue.***

Human beings are not created to learn things instantly upon the first lesson. This is true for children and adults. Students must study, college classes have reviews, baseball teams have practices, and orchestras, dancers and actors have rehearsals. As they say, practice makes perfect. Children have an incredible amount of things to learn in their lives and they don't easily transfer lessons learned in one area to another. For example, they may learn not to run into the street, but not understand that they also shouldn't run into a parking lot. Your toddler might learn not to touch the TV controls, but still reach for the DVD controls or the computer keyboard. There is an almost endless amount of new input in the early years. It's a lot to process and remember.

This concept is complicated by the fact that even when children learn a rule it doesn't mean that they will always abide by it! This applies to family rules, society's rules and rules of nature. Children will often test to see if the rules still hold true, or if they can manage to bend them or even break them without any repercussions. Children may believe they have a good reason to break the rule, they might think the rule is unfair, or they might think no one is watching so they can't get caught, or they may not understand the rule or how it applies to the situation. One other reason is that the forbidden is too enticing to resist.

Actually, adults still engage in this rule-testing behavior: Do you always obey the posted speed limit? No? According to some studies, almost 70% of drivers admit to speeding over the posted limit. You might speed on a given day because:

- You're in a rush to make it to an appointment. (Have a good reason.)
- You think the limit is too slow for the road. (The rule is unfair.)
- You know there's never a police car on the road. (Won't get caught.)

- You didn't see the speed limit sign. (Didn't know the rule.)
- Your new car *needs* to go fast. (Too tempting to resist.)

You can increase the odds that your child will learn rules by keeping them simple and specific, and then being very consistent in enforcing them. (There's much more about this in other chapters of this book!)

***Mistaken belief: My child misbehaves just to spite me.***

When your child is misbehaving, pushing your buttons and totally out of control, you may think, "Why is he doing this *to me*?" In reality, your child isn't even thinking about you at all, except to the extent that you are standing in the way of what he wants to do. Children don't misbehave just to make you mad – they don't want to hear you yell, they don't want to be punished -- they would avoid that at all costs! Your child wants what he wants, when he wants it, it's as simple as that.

Mother-speak

"I'm eight months pregnant, so my two year old can be a bit of a challenge to keep up with. Yesterday, I was tired and we were at bath-and-bed time. She was obviously getting tired herself and melting down a bit, so I asked her to pull out the plug and come out of the tub. She pulled the plug, but absolutely refused to get out. She actually lay down in the tub, as the water drained around her. I can't bend over and pick her up from that angle, so I got totally frustrated. I said "Fine. Don't get out. Stay in there. I can't do this anymore." I sat down on the chair near the tub, hung my head, and wouldn't look at her. She stood up and said "Mommy, can I give you a

kiss and make you feel better?" Wow, I sure did feel better in a hurry! Sometimes it's so hard to step back and realize that this is a little PERSON I'm dealing with. She has her own thoughts and ideas and plans – she's not out to make me miserable. Sometimes it just takes a kiss to clear our heads again and make it all better!"

Sheri, mother to Faith, age 2 1/2

***Mistaken belief: My child only listens to me when I get angry.***

Many parents believe this to be true because it *has been true* for them. The reason for this is that some parents only get serious about discipline when they become angry. In my book, Hidden Messages: What Our Words and Actions are Really Telling Our Children I tell the story of a parent affected by this dilemma:

Ken is sitting at the kitchen table handling his least favorite task—filling out tax forms. He's surrounded by checkbooks, calculator, paperwork, and his cup filled with coffee. His children, Katie and Andy, are happily playing a game close by in the family room. All is quiet on this Saturday morning—at least until two high-pitched giggling fits abruptly break the silence

Ken peers over his glasses at the source of the merriment. "Hey guys, I'm *working* in here." The room settles into quiet again, but not for long. Game pieces suddenly find lives of their own, their rambunctious activities narrated by two young voices. Not even glancing their way, Ken grumbles, "You guys are being awfully noisy." The pieces continue their action in a whisper, and Ken again focuses on his work.

Not five minutes later, the game pieces engage in a mock-battle that ends in a loud crescendo. Ken expresses his exasperation in two words: “Katie! Andy!” He shakes his head and mumbles, “Why don’t these kids ever listen to me?” He begins, once again, to wade through the endless tax forms. Just as the instructions start to make sense, his energetic young ones, now bored by their fantasy play, begin a new game, complete with shouts and whooping around the room.

Ken’s patience reserve has been depleted—and to signal the event, he slams his pencil on the table, scrapes back his chair, and marches into the family room and up to the children. With a bright red face, and bulging eyes, he bellows, “Katherine Nicole! Andrew Shawn! I have had *enough!* I cannot work with all the noise! Either BE QUIET or GO OUTSIDE and play!”

The kids mutter, “Sorry, Daddy,” as they shuffle out of the room and head for the swing set in the back yard. Ken walks back to the table, his hands nervously combing back his hair, his breath labored. He’s wondering why his kids only listen to him when he gets angry.

When you examine this situation you’ll see what really happened. This father lacks purpose or skill at the beginning of the story. He makes his first three statements from another room with no specific instructions or call to action. He makes vague comments without telling the children what he wants from them. (What exactly is the right response to “Hey guys, I’m *working* in

here.”? Maybe, “Good for you, Daddy. Someone has to pay taxes around here.”) It isn’t until Ken gets angry that he actually uses good parenting skills! One—he walks into the room and faces his children directly. Two—he states the problem. “I cannot work with all the noise.” Three—he gives them a solution: a choice they all can live with. “Either be quiet or go outside and play.”

In essence, Ken’s anger was not necessary, and it wasn’t anger that solved the problem. It was the three specific parenting skills he unknowingly used. However, if John continues this pattern his children will learn that he only means business when he gets angry, so he may unwittingly fall into a pattern of angry parenting.

***Mistaken belief: My angry outbursts create permanent damage in our relationship.***

Nearly all parents love their children with an intensity that matches nothing else on earth. Their children are a part of their heart and soul, and the center of their lives. So when parents erupt in anger at their children they feel they have created a permanent hole in the relationship, as Bridget explains in the story that follows.

Mother-speak

“Whenever I think about anger, it reminds me of a story I heard. It's the one about the boy who would have these angry outbursts, and every time he did, his father would have him hammer a nail into their fence. During a calmer moment, he had his son take out all the nails he had hammered into the fence. There were big holes where the nails had been, marring the fence. His father said that every time he had one of those angry outbursts, it had a permanent effect on the

people around him, just like those unsightly holes in the fence. This story always fills me with tremendous guilt, because I do realize that my children absorb my angry outbursts, and I feel like I am leaving those holes behind.”

Bridget, mother to Ethan, age 7, Devan, age 3, and Sage, age 19 months

Of course, a parent’s rage, physical aggression or hurtful words can create these holes. Repeated hostility and violent words and actions can leave a lasting mark on a child’s personality. It’s very important to learn how to control your anger to prevent it from reaching this danger zone.

However, we should not worry quite so much that every angry moment leaves its mark. Most of our outbursts are simply moments of unpleasantness that can be overcome with constructive parenting skills. Love and positive interaction can make up for bad moments in an otherwise good relationship – kind of like a quality putty and paint touch-up to that fence. Children are a great deal more resilient than fences – the little holes usually fill right up with the next hug and giggle.

### **Having a Plan to Manage Your Anger**

Now you understand that as a parent you *are* going to get angry at your child, and you can’t change that fact. However, you *can* change what you do with that anger when it first appears, and you can learn how to stop it from growing out of control.

It is nearly impossible to rein in your emotions at the time they occur *unless you have a plan in advance*. Having an anger plan is like leaving for a road trip with a map and driving directions to follow, versus having no plan: driving off with a general destination in mind, but no specifics on how to get there. Once you are on the road you are moving forward, and without a specific plan you may never reach your destination. The same applies to anger – when it catches you off guard it likely takes off with a life of its own. If you have a plan, however, you can direct your emotions in the way that suits your goals as a parent.

### **The Danger of Anger**

There are a few things that should occur in order for you to be able make the best use of the six step plan to staying calm that follows. First, you must believe that no good comes from anger. Anger, in and of itself, is not a solution to any problem. It often just makes things worse by causing your child to focus on your harsh words and actions. Children have natural defensive responses to a parent's anger: they feel misunderstood, attacked or unfairly accused. Whether these are true or accurate beliefs does not matter – they still prevent a child from learning the lesson you are trying to impart, and in the worse cases, when repeatedly used, drive a wedge between parent and child.

The other important idea to accept is that almost any problem can be held off for a time, until you gain control of yourself. It's a rare parenting issue that requires an instant response or solution. Even a young child has enough memory power to remember what they did an hour or more after it happened. (If you don't believe me, test the idea. While you're preparing dinner

promise your child that you'll go out for ice cream after you eat – and see if your promise is remembered!)

In most cases, when you can halt anger, collect yourself, and then approach the issue with a level head you will have much better results than if you fly off the handle and explode in anger.

Children usually don't learn the intended lesson from an angry parent. However, they can learn valuable lessons when a controlled parent makes a specific discipline solution.

Another reason that is important to manage your anger effectively is because repeated, uncontrolled anger can cause a parent to resort to physical punishment, such as spanking, slapping or pinching a child, which have all been proven to be ineffective, and potentially harmful methods of discipline. Repeated anger can also lead to major family problems, such as child abuse, divorce, or the creation of mental health problems for parents and children, including depression or anxiety.

Once you view anger as a potentially dangerous emotion that is wise to avoid, you need to be able to recognize when anger is happening to you. As we discussed previously, there are many stages of anger from mild to extreme. The sooner you acknowledge that your emotions are creeping up the anger scale the better, since it's much, much easier to gain control at the start.

You can start to learn how to control your anger by tuning into your body and feeling the anger rising within you. While everyone feels emotions differently, there are a number of typical

physical signs that accompany anger. Next time you begin to feel angry try to note which of these you feel:

- Clenched teeth
- Tight jaw
- Tense body
- Shallow, rapid breathing
- Tightening of the stomach, stomach pains or nausea
- Increased heart rate
- Heated face, neck or ears
- Tightening of muscles
- Feeling a pounding or fullness in the head, like a headache
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Squinting
- Changing tone or volume of voice
- Cursing or saying harsh words
- Feeling the urge to scream or cry
- Feeling the urge to hit, slam things, bang things, or run away
- Inability to hear or understand others

When we begin to metamorphous into our angry self, much of our behavior becomes automatic and harder to control. Learning to recognize your own early warning signs of anger allows you to rein in your temper.

## **What Triggers Your Anger?**

It is helpful to identify those things that provoke your anger, so you are aware of the possibility of anger before it even begins. You can also examine the issue in advance -- at a time when you are calm and in control, to see what changes you can make to reduce the incidents from occurring. This allows you to use preventive action that will change your child's behavior, which in turn, reduces the amount of anger that you might feel.

As an example, let's say that your children argue when seated beside each other in the car. The arguing, while you are trying to drive, is distracting and frustrating. You usually end up yelling at the pair of them. Since you are in the vehicle two or more times every day, this is a major anger issue in your life. So instead of going about things in exactly the same way, and getting exactly the same results, take the time to set a plan to solve the problem. You might post "car rules" with exact consequences for breaking them. You might put books, lap games and snacks in the car to keep the kids busy and happy. You might create a chart to log successes in the car so that the kids can earn a reward for staying pleasant in the car. By approaching this anger trigger in a productive way you can reduce the amount of arguments that occur in the car, thus reducing the amount of anger in your day. This technique can be used for any repeat issue that triggers your anger.

Most parents get angry over issues that are insignificant in the grand scheme of life, yet happen on such a regular basis that they become blown way out of proportion. So take the time to

identify your anger triggers, and perhaps using the skills in this book, set a plan to correct each behavior problem that sets off your anger. Some of the most common parenting issues that trigger anger are:

- Whining
- Unnecessary crying
- Temper tantrums
- Siblings bickering and fighting
- Back talk
- Lack of cooperation
- Refusing to do as told
- Constant interruptions when you're busy
- Ignoring parent's calls or requests
- Repeated misbehavior that doesn't cease
- Unacceptable behavior in public (such as public tantrums/not cooperating)
- Procrastination and dawdling

In addition to triggers like these, there are "hot spots" or danger zones in the day when anger more easily rises to the surface. These are typically times when family members are tired, hungry or stressed, and those emotions leave us more vulnerable to anger. The typical danger zones are:

- Mornings, when rushing to get off to work and/or school
- Mid-day when children and parents have a dip in energy, older kids come home from school, and no one has had a nap
- Immediately after work when the day's stresses are still brewing

- When your home is filled with playmates or visitors
- Before dinner, when everyone is hungry and dealing with end-of-the day tension
- Late evening, just before bedtime, when everyone is tired

It can help to look over the previous lists and determine what your triggers and hot spots are.

Once you identify them, think about if there are things you can do differently to ward off some of the things that spark your anger. For example, if the morning rush brings too much stress, you can prepare the night before by setting out clothing, packing lunches, collecting shoes and coats and create a “morning routine poster” that outlines the morning routine step-by-step. If you find that tempers are short in the hour before dinner, then set out healthy appetizers, such as vegetables with dip or cheese and fruit and note if this helps. If your children bicker over sharing toys, set up specific rules for sharing, label special toys that aren’t available for sharing, teach the new rules to your children, and enforce them quickly when they aren’t upheld.

Doing things the way you’ve always done them and expecting different results only leaves you frustrated and angry. Instead, identify your anger triggers and daily hot spots and take action to change things for the better.

It helps to keep in mind all of the reasons for parental anger and the mistaken beliefs that we covered earlier. When you train yourself to look for the underlying problems you will become more aware of them. When you become aware of these underlying reasons for your anger you will be more likely to control your emotions before they explode.

Anger is not something that can be dealt with once and then will go away! As your children grow and change, and as new issues appear, you'll find yourself needing a reminder of all that you learn. So, re-read this chapter from time to time for a quick refresher course. That way you can take a fresh look at the issues that create negative emotions in your family and refresh your memory about how to manage our anger.

And, finally, hold on to the feeling of love that is the foundation of your relationship with your child. Take time every day to bask in the joy of being a parent. Take time to play. Take time to talk and listen. Hug, kiss and cuddle your children often. When you build up this foundation of positive love and emotion you will find yourself less likely to experience intense anger.

Mother-speak:

"I often find that I am talking to a brick wall with my two-year-old daughter. She wants what she wants, and she doesn't like to do what she's being asked to do. Her responses to things I want from her are either silence, ignoring me, or continuing to whine and cry, and it infuriates me until I yell at her. However, I have come to realize that when I get mad at her she thinks that somehow my love for her has lessened. Nowadays, when we have an episode of defiance and an exchange afterwards, I don't let it linger. I pick her up and hug her. She lays her head on my shoulder and I remind myself that she is a cherished child. Only a few years ago, I had no child to hold and thought I'd never have one. How quickly I forgot how much pain I was in from not having a child? And here I am, getting upset at her little antics; the behavior that would be so welcomed in the life of a childless woman. I realize that I am truly blessed. She is a joy to hold and to love. I

have to make a conscious effort to remember that after all she is only a little child.”

Shaila, mother to Aanayh, age two and a half

Now it's time to move on to the specific six step process that you can use to control your anger.

### **Your Anger Control Plan - Six Steps to Staying Calm**

#### **Step 1 –**

**Stop** – Space – Soothe – See – Specify – Solve

Step one towards gaining control is to **STOP** yourself as soon as you realize that you are getting angry. The purpose is to catch yourself at the very start of anger and stop your emotions from escalating out of control.

When your anger controls your words and actions, what follows will be unpleasant and ineffective. You will *not* teach your child what you intend to teach. He or she will not hear the meaning of your words – your child will be mired in your anger. Your child's focus will be your anger, *not* whatever point you are trying to make. Please believe me. You *can* make your point and teach a better lesson if you **STOP** now and wait. When you are calm and in control you can be rational and you can actually achieve the goal you are setting out for.

It's a fact of life that you are going to get upset, annoyed and frustrated with your child, and you are going to raise your voice. A short burst of unhappiness that quickly dissipates is not an issue to be concerned with. However, the minute you no longer feel in control of your words or actions is when things begin to go downhill fast, and when all hope of teaching is lost.

As you as you sense your control slipping – STOP. If you are in the middle of a sentence – STOP – don't even finish your thought, except perhaps to say, "I'm getting mad!" If you are moving – STOP moving. Practice a STOP gesture which can be used as a way to put a physical brake on your emotions, and also as a signal to your child that your anger is rising out of control. A good STOP gesture is to hold your hands up in front of your face, fingers straight up, palms out. Push the anger away from you, and at the same time say the word, STOP. You can say it loudly and firmly. The word and action has two purposes. It is a physical motion to help you halt your actions, and it is directed at your child to let him know you are too angry to continue as is.

This STOP is for *you*, it is not intended to stop your child's actions, because it most likely will *not* stop your child's misbehavior. Your yelling child may continue to yell. Your tantruming child might continue to tantrum. Your bickering children might continue to bicker. The theory here is that you must get yourself calmed down in order to deal with your child's misbehavior. If you are lucky enough, over time, this may begin to stop your child's action as well, as he learns that once you STOP there is no point in continuing, since you will be disengaged.

I recommend that you talk to your child about this in advance. Let him know what your new plan will be. It might sound something like this, "*Mommy doesn't like to yell and get mad. So when I*

*get upset I'm going to put my hands up like this (demonstrate) and I am going to say STOP! This means that I am getting mad and I need to stop talking and calm down.*" There are two advantages to explaining your plan in advance. First your child will know what to expect and why you're doing it, so you won't catch him off guard. Also, it shows him a productive way to handle his own anger.

### **Releasing your anger – but not at your child**

What if you are so angry at your child that you are ready to strike him and you cannot find the restraint to use your STOP gesture? In that case, channel your physical reaction into a burst of applause. Granted, it won't be happy applause. When you feel yourself about to strike, clap your hands. Clap them good and hard and fast, while you express your feelings of anger. Try it now. Pretend you're angry, clap your hands, and tell your imaginary child how you feel. ("OH! I am so angry right now!!") You'll find that in addition to releasing your pent-up anger it will send a very clear message to your child.

#### **Mother-speak**

"We use a silent scream in our house to release anger - it is just like a full throated regular scream with all the screwed up face and eyes, wide open mouth, fists clenched and body tight and vibrating - just without the sound. I've taught my daughters how to use it when they get angry. After a particularly busy and frustrating morning, my daughter Willow suggested that I use one as I grumbled at the traffic - it was fabulous, although I think the other drivers might've thought I was crazy, it saved me from losing my temper!"

Jane, mother to Isla, age 5 and Willow, age 4

## **When to STOP**

This anger management technique of acknowledging anger and stopping yourself can be used for all problems. It can be effective with everything from minor irritations that bring irrational anger, to major problems that require a clear head to solve. The time frame on this step can be anywhere from a few minutes to a day or more, depending on how upset you are and how big the problem is that you must deal with, and how quickly you must address the issue with a solution.

To recap, once you sense that you are losing control use your STOP gesture and words to halt the evolution of anger.

## **Step 2**

Stop – **Space** – Soothe – See – Specify – Solve

Now that you've stopped, you need to step away from your child. When you are angry, the *last* thing you need to do is stay engaged in the situation that is making you mad – all that does is escalate your anger. If your child is whining and fussing and it has driven you to anger and you call out “STOP,” but then you stay in the room while he continues to whine and fuss, you will likely just get worked right back up to anger again. This is the time to put some space between you and your child.

Creating this space might involve putting a baby into the crib, a toddler in a safe place for time out (or even putting him in front of the TV), or turning your back on a whining child. If your

child doesn't willingly separate from you, it's not the time to get into a shouting match over making him go – just put yourself in the bedroom or bathroom for your own time out. If you cannot leave the room, then cross your arms, shut your eyes and stand still. Put on your music headset and create your own private space right there in the middle of the room.

Putting space between you and your child accomplishes a number of things. First, it communicates your dissatisfaction to your child – it lets him know that you are too upset to continue. It prevents the episode from getting out of control. It allows you to calm yourself down so that you will have the presence of mind to solve the problem that is upsetting you. One other advantage to using this technique – it teaches your child an important anger-management skill. You are setting a good example of how to walk away instead of proceeding with angry or hurtful words and actions.

Mother-speak:

"It's a good idea to speak to your children before an angry outburst occurs and let them know what to expect so they aren't shocked by your departure. Explain, "When Mommy gets angry, Mommy may need to go to her room to cool down. What could you do while you're waiting for Mommy to cool down? Mommy really wants to be calm and not yell."

Kim, mother to Benny, age 3 and Lily, age 8

If you need to stop a dangerous situation, or if you need to separate children who are fighting, do so before walking away, but do it without discussion – hold your thoughts for later.

Remember that almost every parenting problem can wait. It doesn't require an immediate resolution. Don't worry – it will still be there when you are ready to face it. (Darn.)

It is critically important that at this point you DO NOT try to deal with the situation that is making you angry. You cannot solve a problem in a fit of anger, and it will likely just escalate the situation, or create a new layer of problems to deal with. You are going to step away from your child so that you can calm and collect yourself and very likely, allow your child to calm down a bit, too.

### **Alternate Step 2: Squeeze**

If you *STOP* and find that your control is now in place you don't have to go on to creating *Space*. Instead, change that to *Squeeze* – embrace your child in a big bear hug. Do not talk. Just hug. And allow your anger to evaporate in the embrace.

Take a deep breath and repeat a calming mantra. Something like, “She’s just a child.” Or, “I can handle this.” Or, “This too shall pass.” Take a minute to look at your child and try to find the love that is hidden there. Remind yourself that she won't be little for long, and someday—trust me—you will miss this period of time.

The hug does *not* mean that you have accepted the misbehavior – you'll still have to deal with that. However, it does tell your child that you love her and will work through any problems. Think about it from a reverse perspective. Let's say that you are in charge of paying the credit

card bill. One month you put the envelope in a drawer and forget to pay it. Your spouse is at a business lunch and attempts to pay the bill but the card is denied. Having no cash, your spouse must ask the other person to pay the bill. Once home, your spouse confronts you with the problem, and is very angry, of course. And you are feeling sick about it. In the middle of it all, your spouse gives you a big hug. You know you're not off the hook, but you do know that you are loved in spite of your mistake.

At any point in the six-step sequence you can switch to a squeeze if you find yourself in control and longing to just hug your child. Remember that doing so doesn't mean you condone the bad behavior- it just means you love your child.

Mother-Speak:

“I used the Squeeze method the other day. My little girl, Derryn had her tonsils taken out and was miserable. I guess my son Wade was feeling jealous of all the attention she was getting so he was being very difficult. Instead of the usual moan, I picked him up and put him on my lap and gave him a big hug. I reflected to him how he must be feeling with his sister not well and being a bit grumpy, and the fact that all the adults were very concerned about her. I also mentioned that he might be feeling a bit left out and also sad that his sister couldn't play with him. Well, he looked at me and nodded. I gave him another hug and off he went to play. It was quite amazing and also so gratifying to have "connected" with him on a level he understood rather than create distance between us by just groaning at him. This really worked for us and I will try to use it more often.”

Heidi, mother to Wade, age 3 ½ and Derryn, age 2

### Step 3

Stop – Space – **Soothe** – See – Specify – Solve

Once you have stopped your angry flow, and separated yourself from your child, take some time to calm and collect yourself.

Begin by controlling your internal, physical responses to anger. Likely your heart rate has increased, your breathing is rapid, your face is flushed, your voice is raised, or any number of the other indicators we discussed previously. No matter your physical symptoms, the first step to inner control is to breathe deeply.

Breathing deeply allows your body to fill with oxygen. This will stop the adrenaline rush that floods your body when you are angry. This extra oxygen flow will relax your body, calm your breathing, slow your heart rate, and allow your brain to resume rational thought.

As you breathe deeply, you may want to close your eyes, or look at something that usually pleases you (a special photograph, your garden, the sky) and take a number of slow, even, deep breaths. Put your hand on your stomach and carry the air down until you feel your stomach rise.

For a few minutes do not think about the situation that is upsetting you. Remember, it will wait. It may take some distraction to pull your thoughts away from the situation. Try counting, reciting

a poem, or repeating a calming word or phrase, such as *Relax, It's okay, This too shall pass*, or *God, please help me*.

Sometimes this breathing/relaxing isn't enough, you'll find your mind continuing to return to your angry thoughts, and winding you right back up again. If this happens, do something different for a time – watch TV, read, listen to music, run on your treadmill, call a friend (but don't talk about the problem just yet.)

There may be other ways that you can soothe and calm yourself. Think about the things you enjoy that most relax you. You may find that yoga, meditation, knitting, singing or prayer works for you. If another adult is able to tend to your children, you might find a brisk walk or jog can help clear your head.

Allow yourself the time for the tension to leave your body and to let the angry feelings subside. At this time you can regain your composure and will begin to think more clearly. Only then are you ready to move forward and begin to solve the problem.

#### **Step 4**

Stop – Space – Soothe – **See** – Specify – Solve

The first step to problem solving is to see what is really happening. In order to fix anything you need to define the problem. But first you must figure out what went wrong. At the time of your

anger, your view of the situation was skewed, and your emotions stood in the way of truly seeing what was happening. Now that you've calmed down, try to see what really happened. You can rewind the scene in your head and figure out what your child was doing (or not doing), what you wanted him to do instead, and why it upset you so much.

A good way to analyze what happened is to imagine that it happened to someone else – your sister or brother or a friend. Or imagine that the scene took place on television and you are called in as the “expert” to analyze what went wrong. Looking at the situation as an outsider might help you see the truth. You might more clearly understand where your anger came from, or you may see that your reaction was way out of proportion – you were about to smack your daughter because she wouldn't eat her green beans!

As you “see” what happened try to focus on the issue at hand. Don't review every other misbehavior that has ever happened in your home, except if it is directly related to this particular case. In other words, thinking about the fact that your non-green-bean-eating daughter hasn't put away her toys or fed the dog can confuse the issue, except to acknowledge that her pattern of not listening to you may be the real problem. The green beans were just the straw that broke the camel's back.

As part of the seeing process, try to adjust any unreasonable or unrealistic expectations that you have. Remember that the farther our expectations are from reality, the more chance that our anger will escalate. So you might even grab a book on child development and check to see if this behavior is normal or typical.

Once you see the situation from a more objective point of view then you can get a better grip on what's happening and begin to make some rational decisions -- before you confront your child. Making this effort to view the situation dispassionately can help you to clarify your long-term discipline and parenting objectives, rather than giving in to the tunnel vision of the short-term clash of wills.

### **Step 5**

Stop – Space – Soothe – See – **Specify** – Solve

Now it's time to define the *exact* problem. After you have seen the situation more clearly, it is time to precisely define the problem in exact words. See if you can come up with a description of the problem in one or two sentences. Put it in clear, plain words that exactly state the real issue that sparked your anger.

It is rare that one isolated action sets off an angry outburst. It certainly isn't *good* behavior sets off an angry exchange. Even if your anger originates with one of the mistaken beliefs, or if you lost control because you have a short fuse due to stress, pain or a bad mood, it is still most likely that the issue that set you off really is misbehavior – typically misbehavior that you deal with repeatedly. You likely don't explode if your child is quietly and happily drawing at the kitchen table. In other words, even if your angry response is inappropriate, it probably has roots in a valid problem.

Try to specify your exact dilemma. Begin with, “The problem is...” Here are a few examples:

The problem is... she has temper tantrums in public.

The problem is... he back-talks and sasses me.

The problem is... she makes a mess and won't clean up.

The problem is... when I tell him to do something he ignores my request.

The problem is... they won't share, and they fight over toys.

The problem is... she's tired and cranky, but won't take a nap.

### **When the problem isn't about your child**

What if you analyze the situation and discover (to your surprise) that the real problem wasn't something your child did, but your inappropriate loss of temper? What if you realize that your angry emotions propelled you to blow the situation way out of proportion? What if you are able to honestly evaluate what happened and discover that this explosion wasn't about your child at all? Or perhaps, it was a somewhat about your child, but mainly about *you*. This is one of the most difficult situations for a parent to face.

The best solution is to apologize, but this isn't always easy. This is often a very complex suggestion, for a number of reasons. Often, your child *did* misbehave, and his action triggered your anger. So even though your response was inappropriate, the child's behavior was also inappropriate as well. In addition, parents often feel that by apologizing for their anger they are relieving the child of any responsibility for his part in the event. Even more, if you have made

loud and firm statements in your angry tirade it feels foolish to go back and eat your words, so sometimes you continue on to defend your angry words and actions, even though you were wrong, and you know you were wrong.

As hard as it may be, there are times when the best thing you can do is admit to yourself that you were wrong and apologize to your child for losing your temper. Apologizing at the right time can teach your child very important lessons about life. It shows him that no one is exempt from making mistakes. It shows him that apologizing is a right thing to do.

Father-speak:

“I am never too old to apologize or too proud to ask my children for forgiveness.”

Brian, father to Michael, age 9, Nathan, age 6, and Karah, age 1

If your child was also wrong, you can explain that although your response was inappropriate, his behavior was as well. Perhaps your apology can be a model for your child’s own apology.

Keep in mind that your apologies to your child should be brief and few. If you find that you are in the position to apologize too often to your child then perhaps you should consider talking to a family counselor for advice on how to better control your angry outbursts.

Let’s now move on to the next step in our **Six Steps to Staying Calm**. Once you clearly identify the cause of your anger, and specified the exact problem, you can then move on to the final step: solving the problem.

## **Step 6**

Stop – Space – Soothe – See – Specify – **Solve**

Now... it's time to solve the problem and move forward with action. By this point you will be calm and composed and you will have clearly identified what went wrong. It is time to decide how best to apply your parenting skills to solve the dilemma. Of course, it helps if you actually have good parenting skills to apply – that's what the rest of this book is about!

Once you've stated the problem, you can then consider options for solving it. You may want to jot down several possible options on paper, or talk about options with another adult. At this time you might want to read through a few of your favorite parenting books and check the indexes for your problem topic. You could also talk it over with another adult or an online parenting chat group or posting board. There's no reason for you to make decisions in a vacuum – I guarantee that the problem you are dealing with is a common one and there are lots of sources for solutions.

### **Follow through**

Once you've taken these six steps you will be very ready to return to your child to address the situation that brought about your anger. You'll be calm, in control and you'll have a plan. All that's left is to follow through on what you've set out to do.

Mother-speak:
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“My husband was away on business last night so it was up to me to get both children to sleep. I read Wade a story and then gave him a new Winnie the Pooh book with CD to listen to while I tended to Derryn. I got the CD going in his room and tucked him in with it, promising to be back as soon as Derryn was asleep. I joined him when Derryn was sleeping and read and listened to one of the stories with him.

Once it was over, I said good night and switched the CD off. That's when the upset began. He didn't want to go to sleep and he was desperate to listen to one more story. I said "No, it's time to sleep." I tucked him in and said good night. He cried and got off his bed and followed me to the kitchen. I picked him up and put him back into his bed. Then he kicked and fussed and wailed about wanting another story. After ten minutes of this I felt myself getting angry; I had a million things I needed to do before getting to bed myself, and my patience was wearing thin.

I remembered your anger steps, so I put my hand up, palm out and said "stop, just stop this now, I'm getting angry." I stepped away from him for a minute and took a deep breath and calmed down. Then I went back and took him in my arms and gave him a big hug saying "I know you're upset because you want to listen to more stories. What I'd like to hear you say is 'thank you mommy for my new book and CD and for letting me listen to the stories. I'm looking forward to tomorrow night when I can listen to another one.' " He hugged me back, and after a minute he said, "Thank you mommy for my new book. Can I listen to it again tomorrow?" I gave him a squeeze and told him he could. He then went peacefully to sleep.

I felt so good that the meltdown had not turned ugly. I hope that I can use your method more and more before I get too emotionally upset and the opportunity is lost. It was very, very rewarding.”

Heidi, mother to Wade, age 4 and Derryn, age 2

Keep in mind that it takes much more than a one-time reading of this information to change your actions. It may take several readings, plus lots of practice, until you find that you are handling your anger in a consistently productive way. You are changing not only what you do, but what your child does, and you are often changing a pattern that has been in place for many months, or even years.

Be kind to yourself. Anger is a difficult emotion to control. Even when you’ve mastered all the skills in this book there will still be times when anger gets the best of you. You’ll lose control with your child, and then you’ll berate yourself for not remembering to use the steps to staying calm. But, try to forgive yourself as you do your child. If you can use what you learn to eliminate even half of the anger episodes in your life you will be far ahead of many, many parents.

Change takes time. Also, don’t underestimate the fact that these ideas are best used along with the ideas from the chapters in this book about Essential Parenting Attitudes and Parenting Skills and Tools. If you don’t change your approach to discipline than the source of your anger will still be there to pop up again and again.

**On the next page** you'll find a review sheet to copy and post in a visible place in your home. At first you'll rely on this reminder to help you through the steps. Remember to start at step one each time your angry feelings begin to take hold. Practice this sequence whenever you are irritable or tense. Eventually, you may begin to use the steps automatically whenever anger takes hold. And that will be a day worth celebrating!

### **Reducing anger-producing situations**

This entire book is about developing good discipline practices which will, in turn, reduce the types of misbehaviors that tend to make you angry. Here are a few quick tips to get you thinking about how you can stop those situations that make you mad -- before they even happen:

- Learn and practice good parenting skills
- Take a bit of non-parenting personal time for yourself every day
- Keep a written schedule or calendar of your responsibilities to prevent haphazard chaos
- Post clear and understandable family rules
- Offer your children choices instead of making demands, whenever possible
- Make your requests brief and clear
- Express yourself using "I" sentences; avoid "you" statements that can create conflict
- Get eye-to-eye when talking to your child (don't shout from two rooms away)
- Pick your battles – not every issue is worth fighting over
- Increase your support system – join a parent club, visit a parenting chat site, make friends with your children's playmate's parents

## **Do you need more help?**

There are times when people are taught anger management skills, but the information doesn't match their personality, doesn't address an underlying reason for anger, or it is not enough to help them to control their emotions. If these six steps don't help you to stay calm, then answer these questions with *yes* or *no*:

- Have you read and studied this chapter and posted the review page, but your anger still gets the better of you?
- Do you lose your temper over both big and small issues?
- Are your angry episodes frequent and/or intense?
- Do your angry feelings last for a long time after the situation that caused them?
- When you are angry do you hit, slam, throw or break things or hurt people?
- Do you find that your spouse or children are becoming afraid of you?
- Are you afraid of yourself when you get mad?
- Is your anger worse now than it used to be?

If you answered *yes* to any of these questions you may have difficulty handling anger that will require more assistance than this book can offer you. There are many places where you can get caring, supportive help for learning how to control your anger. You may want to explore several options, since there are various approaches used for anger management. The following are

possible options for getting the help that you need, either through classes, group workshops or individual counseling:

- Local hospital
- School counselor
- Your priest, minister or other religious leader
- Family doctor
- Counselor, therapist, psychologist, or other mental health professional

The No-Cry Discipline Solution by Elizabeth Pantley - Copy and post this reminder on your refrigerator.

## **Six Steps to Staying Calm**

### **Stop:**

Identify your angry feelings

Raise hands and stop talking

### **Space:**

Move away from your child or move your child away from you

Alternate choice if calm: **Squeeze** – Give your child a big hug.

**Soothe:**

Calm yourself

Deep breathing, relaxing phrases, prayer or yoga

Read, listen to music, exercise

**See:**

Replay what happened in your mind's eye

Analyze the situation objectively

**Specify:**

Define the *exact* problem (“The problem is...”)

**Solve:**

Decide which parenting skills to use

Create several possible solutions

Follow through

