

Listening to Children

Reaching for Your Angry Child



by Patty Wipfler

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The Challenge

When our children are angry, we parents are thoroughly challenged. The intensity of their feelings is great, and we feel strongly in response. We often try to “talk sense into that child” at first. Reasoning with them rarely solves the problem, though, because children are quickly trapped by their angry feelings. Their usual intelligence and good judgment become temporarily, but totally, disabled. They can’t listen to or make sense of what we say. Our own frustration rises when we can’t talk them out of their upset. We often stumble into anger too, when our children are angry.

How do we turn angry times into constructive times? How can we begin to undo the distance anger creates? What’s needed is a way to bring our angry children back into good communication with us. We want to let them know they are cherished, even though things don’t always go the way they want. If we reach out to an angry child, offering attention and love, she has the opportunity to fight through her resentment and do away with it. The alternative is to punish or isolate the child, who then stores up her anger inside, where it tends to grow and fester.

Handling children’s anger is one of the most difficult and universal jobs in parenting. The *Parenting by Connection* approach to anger is based on the observation that when children are feeling upset or are behaving irrationally, they can recover their ability to function well if a parent will offer closeness and caring while they cry, tremble and perspire, tantrum, or laugh. These responses are signs that the child’s brain is dismantling feelings of hurt that have snarled his ability to be reasonable. As the parent stays close, the child offloads the irrational feelings, and his sense of connection is restored.

Relieved, he is able to think again, and the issue that caused the anger loses its sting.

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• NOTE: Before continuing, please read the other five pamphlets •
• published by **Hand in Hand: Special Time, Playlistening, Crying,** •
• *Tantrums and Indignation*, and *Healing Children's Fears*. •
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When we were angry children, most of us were treated with disrespect. If we were fortunate, we were sent away to cool off without physical or verbal abuse. Many of us were not so fortunate. Our parents couldn't tolerate our anger; they were too upset to help us through our troubled times. Because this intolerance for anger is our heritage, an overview of anger may be useful before we outline what helps an angry child.

Anger Covers Deeper Hurts

An angry child is one who is quite frightened and sad underneath her tough stance. However small the issue, she feels that something absolutely vital to her is being threatened, and she has no choice but to fight. She also feels alone. As far as she can tell, no one understands her, no one will come to her rescue, and everyone is out to hurt her. Children naturally lean toward affection and companionship. When you see a child fiercely attacking her loved ones, you can assume that she is sitting on extremely painful feelings. She puts up her guard, daring us to care that she is hurt and needs help.

When children feel sad, they can eliminate their hurt by crying. When they are afraid they dissolve their fear with crying, trembling and perspiration. When they are frustrated they tantrum, and then recover their emotional equilibrium. These recovery processes can be relied upon to restore a child's ability to love, reason, and learn. However, there is no distinct recovery process that heals feelings of anger. Anger is the barbed wire fence we parents have to crawl through to reach a child who is frightened and full of grief. Once we learn to work our way toward our children while they are angry,

we can assist them to shed the grief and fear that lie at the heart of the matter.

A Child's Anger Always Has a Fearful Experience Beneath It

When children feel they are in danger, are left alone too much, or when they witness other people being hurt, strong fears overtake them. During these hurtful times, they are almost always too frightened or overwhelmed to fight for themselves. An all-out fight would be a healthy reaction to danger, but if the fear is overwhelming, it makes children passive. They withdraw or freeze, and quietly try to survive. These frightening times make a deep impression. Children remain frightened long after they have reached safety. *They retain fear both of the particular trouble they faced, and the passivity that overcame them.*

To picture what these fears feel like, try to remember the worst nightmares you have had. Most of us have had dreams of needing to escape from a terrible fate, and not being able to make our bodies move, or of crying out for help, but having no voice. This frightening combination of danger and helplessness is something like the fears many children carry.

Small incidents can trigger your child's fear from some long-past but genuine crisis. She feels just as alone and frightened as she did during that time of real trouble, but now that the *present* threat is minor, she defends herself at last. She gets angry. If she is a toddler, another child may sit too close to her, and she reaches out to pull his hair. Or, with an older child, a friend may tease a bit, and your child responds by starting a fistfight. Of course, the child's reaction doesn't make sense any longer—the real crisis is over. The angry child is fighting an unseen adversary. Her fears still haunt her, turning harmless incidents into replays of that old crisis. Telling her there's no need to be angry has no effect on how she feels, as you have surely discovered. But you can help her work through her fear and sadness by staying with her when her anger rises.

An Angry Child Can't Tell You the Real Source of Her Fear

A child can't tell you "I feel afraid for my life just like when I got stuck in the birth canal for three hours." She will simply show panic or outrage whenever another child crowds too close to her. She won't say "I feel scared, the same way I did when I cut my head last year." But when you try to help her with her scraped knee, she'll kick you and demand that you leave her alone. Real crises deeply affect a child, and they are recorded in detail in her mind, but they are not always accessible as conscious memories. It is usually impossible for a child to refer directly to a crisis. Instead, the leftover feelings poke into your child's everyday experience like thorns into the flesh, causing your child to react angrily, even at times of warmth and closeness. You may not ever learn what originally frightened your child. Fortunately, children don't need us to completely understand their inner workings. They simply need our attention while they expel the feelings that drive them off track.

You Will Be the Target

When you attempt to reach past your child's anger to offer her support, you will see and hear about some long-fermented aloneness. Your child either couldn't get the help she needed at the time of crisis, or she was so frightened that she couldn't feel the help that was there. In either case, a frightened child feels alone against the world, and terribly disappointed in *you*. It's unfair and irrational, but it seems that when children have felt endangered and helpless, they direct their reaction—usually anger and mistrust—toward the people closest to them.

Of course, you don't deserve to be the target of all that bitterness. You have done your level best to be loving, kind, loyal and generous. Your child yells that you have never cared about her, you've been mean and thought only of yourself. It's no picnic reaching out to an angry child. But if you get busy defending yourself and straightening out the truth, you won't be concentrating on your frightened child.

She needs to tell you just how far away from you she feels before she can let you help her with her fears. Listening to passionately felt bitterness while you continue to offer your caring seems to be the fastest, most efficient way through the tangle. Remember, your child is frightened and sad inside, and wants to find some way to trust you again, so she can finally sob in your arms and feel your protection, your love for her.

Your Goal Is to Reach Your Child

Your goal is to lovingly stay with your child in spite of her anger, her intense desire to be alone, and her mistrust of you. An angry child is trying hard to expel some deep hurt, but she doesn't feel loved enough to do so. You can't make her feel loved, but you can persistently offer your caring until that hurt has been shed. After screaming, trembling, perspiring, and crying—the messy activities that relieve children of their deepest hurts—your child will be surprised and relieved to find that you've been on her side all the time she's been angry with you.

You Will Need Help

When reaching out to an angry child, a parent needs presence of mind, plenty of time, and faith that a tender heart can be found inside this furious young person. It also requires some skill you can only get with practice. No parent has these resources on hand every time her child's anger wells up, and few of us are practiced in this field. Handling anger is like learning to juggle flaming torches: it's best to juggle easy items first, then try the torches, and then add the flame. Start by listening when your child is crying and there is no anger involved. You need to get the feel of helping her through her grief, and she needs to learn to trust you when times are hard. Then try listening through her tantrums and her fears, so that you gain an understanding of these recovery processes, too. You'll need to see that a sweetly reasonable child will emerge from a writhing, heated, seemingly out-of-control state. By now you may have built enough trust between you to add the flame: you can begin reaching for her when she is angry.

Grownups in our society are understandably poor at reaching out to an angry child. Most of us were physically threatened or attacked (spanked, beaten, or belted) for angry behavior. We lose our cool around anger, because that's how our parents handled it. Those of us who struggle with our children's tight, angry episodes deserve consistent help to untangle our upsets from theirs. *Getting help with our own issues is a key step in reaching for our angry children.*

Our angry responses, like our children's, guard the door to feelings of sadness and fear. We are bothered by our child's upset, the heat of our own anger, fears that we've failed, fears that our children will fail, or fears that we won't survive the stresses of parenting. Search out a friend who can be a caring listener. Talk about yourself, your child, your hopes, and your disappointments. In time, as your friend listens and cares, you may find the safety to let your own tears fall and trembling show while you face how hard it gets. Talking and finding release for your own upsets will give you more listening room for your child, and more staying power as you try to reach through to her when she's angry.

Guidelines for Reaching for Your Angry Child

Here are some guidelines that can help you find your way past your child's anger to the healing of the fear and grief beneath.

- **As a first step, offer Special Time.**

A sense of distance from loved ones is at the heart of children's anger. So, although we adults are pulled to tackle an angry child's upsets with serious measures, it's far more effective to begin by offering him a kind of fresh start with you through Special Time. The angrier your child, the more he needs regular one-on-one time to warm his connection with you, show you what he loves to do, and absorb your approval.

Special Time helps both of you get your minds off of difficult interactions, and focuses your attention on fun. It builds the sense of connection your child needs in order to eventually heal the upsets he carries. As you offer your attention and approval,

your child gains confidence that you are on his side. You are then in a much better position to connect with your child when his anger rises.

If you feel so upset with your child that you feel you can't offer Special Time, you will need to find a listener with whom you can offload your upset. You and your child will be helped greatly by your courage to take the first step to get help with the feelings that his anger has sparked.

- **When your child seems angry, stay with her and learn what you can about the nature of the trouble.**

"You took my last fish stick, and I wasn't even finished yet!" Your first job in an angry situation is to listen and sort out what is happening. Fresh indignation and tantrums are each loud, but quite different from anger, which tends to be tight, threatening and mean-spirited. It can take a few minutes to understand whether your child is indignantly righting a wrong, beginning a healthy tantrum or putting up a shield of anger. (Sometimes, a child will begin with indignation, and get trapped in tight anger after a few moments.)

Stay close and encourage your child to tell you more: "What happened?" "Tell me more," "What is it that you want?" If you see bitterness, a tight, mistrustful tone, or a desire to hurt you or someone else, your child's guard is all the way up. If, however, she is angry but is already crying, perspiring or trembling, the recovery process that will heal her underlying fear and grief has started. She is already using your assistance to make progress.

- **Assess your own state of mind.
Are you levelheaded enough to try to reach for her right now?**

When your child gets angry, it's wise to check your store of patience and understanding. Do you have some time? Can you

decide not to be upset with her for being angry? Are you ready to weather a difficult time in order to help her? If so, proceed.

If you feel attacked or enraged, your attention is on your own feelings and not on the needs of your child. At the moment, you cannot help her. It probably makes sense to try to break the grip of your own anger. Call a friend, or find a place—perhaps the bedroom, washroom, or garage—where you can yell, stomp, or pound on something unbreakable. Noise and motion will help you regain some ability to think constructively again. If you can cry or tremble, some of your own tension will drain. One mother I know would lock herself in the bathroom when her fury was high. She would look at herself in the mirror, pound on the sink and yell to herself that she was a good mother who didn't deserve all this trouble. She could cry hard for five or ten minutes about how hard her life was, and come out much relieved, ready to attend to her children without anger. We mustn't pretend to reach out to our children when we're seething inside. And it's best that we aim our upsets in a harmless direction when our own feelings get too hot to handle.

As we try to reach out to an angry child, we need to promise ourselves that we will change course whenever we ourselves get angry. When we start to snap back or argue, it's time to take a break or to quit. Simply say "I can't help you right now. I don't want to fight with you. I'll be back when I'm not so mad." When your anger flashes quickly, it's all right to just get up and leave the room. Explain later, after you've stomped around in the other room awhile. Our children can learn to make do while we aim our own anger elsewhere. These emergency procedures will help ensure that the mistakes you make as you learn will be short-lived.

- **Offer your child warmth and closeness.**
Don't force it, but do keep offering.

Try to hold your ground. An angry child needs to discover that she won't lose your caring. You are trying to move toward her in spite of her attacks by showing that you want to be with her.

Recovery from grief and fear can begin when she understands that she can't get rid of your caring, no matter what she says or does. You need to listen fully to her feelings, but not back away from her because of them. As you hold out your arms to her or reach to touch her gently, she will become dead sure that you are the last person on earth she wants to be with right now. She will fight you verbally at least, telling you awful feelings she has about you. "I hate you!" "You're always making me feel bad!" "You never listen, and you're not listening now!" "You're making me even angrier! Just get away!" are the kinds of things you can expect to hear as she fights to keep the lid on the hurt beneath her anger.

- **Stay with your child, and keep listening.**

Your child may try to run away and be alone. She will tell you that's what she needs, and that you are making her angrier by following. You'll be on shaky ground here, because none of us is an expert at remaining thoughtful while someone is acting as though we are the enemy. Also, there have been times when you haven't listened to her, and she is certainly reminded of them now. Your task is to stay close enough to let your child feel your attempt to help, and to indicate that you are indeed considering what she says. This may mean, if you are being ordered to "Go away!," that you say "OK, I'll take a few steps back now, but what I really want to do is to come and sit by you on the bed."

The situation is paradoxical. Our children are trapped by deep feelings of hurt, and don't feel safe enough to trust us in any direct way. Fairly or unfairly, they blame us for their troubles, and can't stand to be around us. Yet, in spite of our shortcomings, we are at the moment the safest, most committed people in their lives. We are also the only people smart enough to reach out to them in times of trouble. In a way, when our children direct anger toward us, they dare us to come and find them. If they had given up on our love, they would be resigned and withdrawn, not engaged in heated battle. An angry child commends you in a backhanded way: your medal is inscribed "Safe Enough to Get Mad At."

- **Explain to your child why you intend to stay.**

Your child needs to hear why you intend to stay with her after she has begged you to leave her alone. You need to be brief, but informative. Be forewarned that the reasons you give will be understood only after her anger is over. To a child in the midst of anger, *nothing* makes sense.

Why do you stay with her? You stay because it hasn't helped her get over her anger when you've gone away before, so you've decided to stay with her this time. You stay because it seems to you that she shouldn't have to be alone when she's feeling so badly. You stay because even though it feels awful to her, if you leave she might think you don't really care about her. You stay because you love her, and want to be close when times are hardest. What's important is that you tell her, in any way you can, that you are trying your best to love her well.

- **If your child struggles against you, protect yourself as necessary. If you can, stay with her and let her continue to struggle.**

When you gradually, thoughtfully move close to an angry child, she will often try to fight in the same way she needed to during an earlier, genuine crisis. It seems that a child who has been terrified simply cannot sit and calmly cry about the time she felt deeply threatened. She never wants to go passive in her fear again, and, because you are hanging in there as a safe, tangible target, she can cast you in the role of the threat she once faced. It *helps* your child to struggle with these feelings of being victimized and unloved. This is usually the crux of reaching your child: your caring as she struggles can unlock the tears and trembling that will bring her close to you again.

- **Don't allow your child to destroy valuables or to hurt anyone.**

Children who are trying to get rid of their upsets don't want to hurt anyone. They don't *want* to be allowed to ruin things. A smashed Kleenex box or ripped magazine is nothing to worry about, but don't allow a child to ruin things you or others value. She will only feel guilty later. You must step in and, without hurting or lashing out at your child, prevent harm from being done. Pull a kicking child away from her sibling, hold firmly onto the toy she is about to throw, or hold her in your lap to keep her from ripping up the leaves of the potted plant she wants to destroy. Let your child show how upset she is, and let her use her strength as she fights, but step in to prevent her from doing actual damage.

- **Resist the temptation to lecture, scold, or criticize.**

Your child cannot reason in the midst of anger. Anything you do to try to show that you're right and she's wrong will only prove to her that no one cares about her. If she became angry because of a reasonable position you took ("You must wear your bike helmet when you ride," or "I won't let you watch this program on TV."), it's not the time to talk extensively about your reasons. Simply hold your position, love her, offer your caring, stay with her, and let her struggle through this irrational storm. If you can be warm and gentle, she'll eventually tremble, cry and relax enough to remember that you love her. Once she's regained contact with you, her judgment will improve, and you can discuss things sensibly. Most likely, by this time your lecture about right and wrong won't be necessary. Your caring will have come through, and the importance of the issue will shrink back to realistic proportions.

Here's an example of how reaching for an angry child can work. In this family, there are two sons, twelve and fourteen years old, and a single mom. The younger son often feels competitive with his older

brother. Their birthdays come three weeks apart, and birthday time is always a bit touchy, because the older boy's comes first, leaving the younger boy vulnerable to feeling second rate. This particular year, the mom remembered that the younger son would be sensitive, so on the older boy's birthday, she asked the younger boy exactly what he wanted. She wrote down everything carefully, including a request for the same kind of desk chair she had given the older son that day.

When the younger son's birthday came, that desk chair, in a different color, was her featured gift to him. He was furious. "Why did you give this to me—I didn't want it! Did I ask for a desk chair? Huh? Mom, you are so disgusting! You don't even think of me at all! You only think of Randy, and you get me the thing he wanted. You just don't even care enough to get me something for *me*! This is the worst birthday I've ever had!" The tirade went on for quite awhile. Her son stomped off into one room, then another, and then tried to throw the desk chair over. His mom, who followed him from room to room, held onto the chair so he wouldn't break it. She told him once, quietly, that he had asked her for a desk chair. She apologized, saying at various times, "I'm sorry you don't like it." "I wanted to get you something really great. It's your birthday, and you're very special to me." "I love you very much, and I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world, if I could help it." "I'm sorry if I made a mistake." She gradually moved toward him, and he sat down on his bed. She sat on the floor next to him, and rested her arms on his leg. From that spot, she figured, he would see her looking into his eyes at least in his peripheral vision.

He finally could begin to cry as she said, "Pete, you've been special to me since the day you were born. I was so happy to see you that day, I felt like flying. You were beautiful to me then, and you are just perfect to me now." He reached out and put one hand on her shoulder, and she got up, sat next to him, and held him close. He cried harder. After awhile, she asked, "Do you want me to tell you more about how I loved you when you were a baby?" He nodded, and they lay down together, his face turned toward the wall, and he

cried off and on as she held him and told him other happy memories of their times together. After a half-hour of crying and snuggling, he got up and had a snack. Awhile later, he came to his mom and told her that he liked the chair just fine after all, and that he was glad she'd gotten a blue one, because that color looked good in his room.

This mom recognized that the feelings behind her son's anger were old feelings—feelings she had anticipated. She had done all she could to make things right. She tried not to feel too badly about choosing the “wrong” gift, realizing that this was an upset that was, in an odd way, constructive. If Pete could cry about not being special, then she would have a chance to help him clear away another chunk of a misperception that bothered him often. She figured that if by tomorrow it was still the wrong gift, she and Pete could go do something about it. For the moment, she concentrated on listening, moving closer, and little by little, finding ways to get her love across. She kept her attention on the important issue, her love for him, and didn't get too distracted by his angry motions, his insults, or his disappointment.

The Issue of Violence

Reaching past a child's anger to help her with her fears often means staying with a struggling or fighting child. Many people think that when a child begins to fight, someone should stand back and order her to stop: a child should not be allowed to be violent. This is almost correct. The child *does* need to be prevented from doing harm to others. But the child, overwhelmed with feelings, is not able to obey spoken orders, which usually only add fuel to the fire. Decisive (but not harsh) intervention by an adult is far more effective. The grownup holds onto the book that's about to be hurled, puts an arm around the waist of the child who is flailing, untangles fingers from the hair of a sibling. After damage control, the child will benefit greatly if the adult is willing to allow her to continue to struggle against her fears, so she can cry, tremble, and perspire until she's rid of the hurt.

All children start out knowing that violence is not a way to solve problems. When, in their anger, they attempt to hurt their friends, siblings or you, they're making a clear plea for intervention and help. An angry child who is hurting someone wants an adult to step in and provide enough resistance so she can struggle without being squelched or humiliated. She is trying to finish an important battle that she once lost. She wants to overcome the fear and self-hatred that drive her to lash out.

There's Time to Make Mistakes and to Learn

Don't be upset with yourself if you make lots of mistakes as you try to handle your child's anger with this new approach. The idea is simple, but our children's upsets do rub our fur the wrong way. It's so tempting to hurl insult for insult, or to argue our well-reasoned positions.

Remember to find a listener who is willing to let you think, plan, and get things off your chest in preparation for the next angry episode. This will help ease some of the loneliness of parenting through hard times. With dependable assistance, it will become easier to reach for your angry child. Slowly but surely, you'll develop the powerful ability to brave criticism and struggle in order to restore the sense of love between you and your child.

Our Mission

Hand in Hand improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the *Parenting by Connection* approach and *Listening Tools* for parents and professionals, contact:

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Literature List

The *Listening Tools* employed in the *Parenting by Connection* approach are fully described in the following **Hand in Hand** literature:

Items marked * are available in Spanish

Booklets

- * *Parenting by Connection*
- * *Listening: A Tool for Caring Parents*
- * *Listening to Children: Seven-booklet set includes How Children's Emotions Work, Special Time, Playlistening, Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears, and Reaching for Your Angry Child*
(also available in Chinese and Japanese)
- * *Setting Limits with Children*
- * *Supporting Adolescents*
- * *Listening to Parents: Listening Partnerships for Parents*
- * *Listening to Parents: Leading a Parent Resource Group*

Audio

- Listening to Children: Audio version of the six-booklet set above*
(on CD)
- * *Cómo Fijar Límites a Nuestros Niños: Spanish audio version of Setting Limits with Children* (on audiotape)

Videotapes

- Setting Limits with Children, 61 minutes*
- Playlistening, 39 minutes*

All are by Patty Wipfler, and can be purchased online at www.handinhandparenting.org or by calling **Hand in Hand** at 650 322-5323.