

Staying in control



When children become angry, don't light the fuse and don't stand well back, says **Paul Dix**...

ultimate standby distractions? How do you record and track incidents? What is your plan for intervening early? Often a gentle guiding hand can avert a more complicated physical struggle later. A quick, quiet word now diverts a half hour scream. Do you have a calm and safe place for children who lose control? What is your planned intervention? Have you agreed it, written it down, shared your plan with the parents? The consistency of your response with individuals is vital. They may not have this consistency at home, but they need it with you.

Young children who get angry do it either because they

have learned that it works for them, or are angry but don't know why. In the first instance the approach is straightforward: "I'll talk to you when you have stopped crying", or "I will come back when you can speak nicely to me". But for children who can't control their anger, or whose anger spills over into violence, the strategies are less obvious.

Anger finds its release in different ways. Some children harm others, some harm themselves. Charlie hides under the table when he is angry, Callum throws the table. Chantelle screams and pulls hair, Chelsea scratches herself, and Ashraf just cries. The symptoms are very different, but the causes are depressingly similar.

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PAUL DIX

States of anger

- Build up ● Trigger ● Escalation
- Explosion ● Recovery

The problem with anger in young children is that they cannot release it in a controlled way. You need to be able to recognise their triggers and act swiftly. What do you have as your

Build up

The 'build up' phase is the easiest place to intervene. Intervene in the child's thoughts and you have a good chance of changing the emotion, averting an outburst. Wait until the emotion is in full swing and you will constantly manage crisis instead of steering behaviour.

Agree a mechanism with the child or with all the children so that they can subtly indicate to you when they are feeling angry. Try tokens placed in the 'Angry Jar', blocks placed in the 'Angry Bucket' or an individual play dough mouth on a paper face that the child can turn when they are feeling unhappy.

Teach children other ways to release angry feelings so that they have safe alternatives. Show them ways that you deal with those feelings. Show them how to 'squeeze it out' on the play dough, shake the anger away with some wriggle, breathe and count, scream into the cushion or just sit in front of the fish tank and talk to the fish!

Try creative visualisation as an alternative. Talk the child into a place in their imagination where they feel calm and serene. Granny's big chair, the top of the tall tree or feet buried in sand. Practise the visualisation regularly with the child; allow them to enjoy spending time there, to enjoy the feelings it gives them. Teach a calming routine and encourage the child to use it.

Triggers

As you get to know the child, obvious triggers may appear. Planning around them can be difficult, particularly if the trigger lies in who goes first, or when being removed from a much loved activity (stuffing the sink with

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paper/pouring sand on Dylan). Transitions between activities may need time warnings and preparation, changing groups will need careful negotiation, and you can never get it right every time. Some children are difficult to read. The build up is less obvious, the triggers well hidden. One minute it's smiles and painting, the next it's biting and paint Armageddon.

Escalation

If the child tries to accelerate through the Escalation stage, your own behaviour is critical. Slow your pace, lighten and lower your voice. Resist the temptation to address the behaviours that emerge through the escalation. These are secondary behaviours designed to distract you. Focus on slowing down decision making, giving options and choices, perhaps lose a battle to win the war.

As the child tries to escalate, reframe some of the thoughts that emerge: "Estelle was trying to help you, she didn't want to keep it", "You're not the worst child ever, you're just having a tricky five minutes". Praise the appropriate behaviour: "It was good that you put the bin down when I asked". Remind them of their previous good behaviour: "Yesterday you really helped me and you were kind to Kiera. That is the boy I need to see today". Make a safe space in your room where the child can take time to calm down and you can

talk. Think about light, sound, display and avoiding distractions in this area.

Explosion

When children really lose control then removing them or the other children protects everyone physically and emotionally. For some children, screaming fits of anger are as normal as fish fingers. For others they can be frightening and worrying. Recognising when the anger has exploded is important; it means that you need to change your approach. As the emotional mind consumes any rational thought, you need to protect the child, yourself and others. Your physical intervention must use as little force as necessary to protect the child, the thoughts that drive your actions grounded in the children's best interests.

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Recovery

Once the explosion is over, some children need to be held, some let go. Some children love bubbling water and plinky music, others need to put their face in a cushion until the world has stopped shaking. Make the recovery phase too comfortable and the cycle appears

attractive. Make it too harsh and you risk the cycle repeating itself immediately. Return the child to activities as soon as you can. Try not to prolong the comfort of the recovery stage.

Having a plan for managing anger means that while you can, teach the child how to manage it and share some responsibility. It means that your actions are more predictable, safer and less improvised. You may not be in control of the cause of the child's anger, but you can have a lasting influence on how they deal with their symptoms.



find out more

Paul Dix is lead trainer at Pivotal Education. Pivotal's new online behaviour management course for nursery has just launched. Go to pivotaleducation.com to see a demo and sign up.