

# Teaching Anger Control Takes Great Patience

by Janai Lowenstein

*“AHHHHHHHHHHH!” screams the preschooler as she throws a toy across the room in anger.*

**What** would you do? If you are stressed and respond in a similar manner, she will understand from your example that she's doing what she's supposed to do. You represent what is possible in her world. But if you use self-calming techniques, communication skills and empathy, with guidance and ground rules, you're on track for successful role modeling. You are planting a seed in this child's life. And if she is already familiar with the techniques you are using, she may join you in taking a deep breath, calming herself, thinking more clearly talking about what just happened.

Implementing self-help skills in a crisis situation with children who have not had any training will be much more difficult than if they have had exposure to these skills. An ounce of prevention *is* worth a pound of cure!

We begin developing our patterns of handling stress, anger and tendencies towards violence at the tender toddler and preschool ages. External factors trigger internal responses. We find ways to survive, and if we aren't taught healthy options, we either inappropriately express or unhealthily repress anger's bubbling emotional lava.

Neither approach will strengthen us or our relationships. It is essential for children to learn that anger is a normal emotion for everyone, and that it is powerful. It is what we do with anger that is the most important point.

There are two options: anger controls a person or the person controls it. Anger can be managed without harm to self, others or the environment. The wisest investment is prevention. Train at a young age.

Back to the preschooler. She is feeling angry, possibly hurt and is blinded by her own anger. Without knowing how to loosen its grip, she is victimized by it, weakened and irrational. Too many tied-up knots of tension internally leads to stress-related illnesses and behaviors. Tension can create more tension.

This child could accumulate a body full of knots that will begin to limit her ability to think and act with good choices. Without skills training, she is ignorant of what is possible. Skilled adults can light the way, empowering children to help themselves handle stress and anger with the grace.

Learning the appropriate levels of tension and relaxation for life becomes a priority. Tension is the precursor to anger. Anger is the precursor to violence. Violence causes harm—of self, others or the environment.

We wouldn't dream of driving 5 mph in fourth gear, or 50 mph in first gear. A certain amount of tension is needed to carry a heavy object across the room. But keeping those muscles at that level of tension when we discuss a disagreement will not lead to good listening or communication

skills. It strips our gears and wrecks our relationships. And, too often, violence becomes the way to release that volcanic power of anger's control. To avoid that:

- Teach children the difference between tense and calm. Research shows that with every mental change, there is a change emotionally and physically, and vice versa. The mind, body and emotions always work together. Tighten one fist and explain to the child it is tense. Talk about having tense thoughts and feelings. Hold the other fist in a relaxed style. Discuss. Look at pictures. Identify “tense” and “relaxed.”
- Demonstrate deep breathing. Count to five slowly while inhaling, then again while exhaling. Demonstrate deep, belly breathing and shallow, throat breathing by blowing up a balloon. Increased oxygen intake fuels the mind, body and emotions properly, creating an internal healthy environment with clearer thinking, relaxed muscles and increased self-control.
- Label feelings and locate where they are felt in the body. Use puppets, role playing and art.
- Teach empathy. Share your feelings.
- Practice, then apply skills in real situations.
- Create safe, healthy options ahead of time for stress and anger release, such as coloring feelings, talking about it with “I” statements (“I feel angry because....”), taking deep breaths and blowing anger out, bouncing a balloon, popping bubbles, hammering wooden pegs, squeezing tension out with a squeeze ball, counting, time-outs.
- Establish guidelines and consequences. For example, it is acceptable to be angry, but it is not OK to throw something. If something is thrown or broken, a trade will be made, such as taking away the privilege of playing with a certain toy and earning it back with an appropriate expression of anger.
- Violence is not an option. Establish ground rules with specific consequences declared in advance.
- Be calm when you help a child deal with anger. Sometimes it is necessary to exaggerate taking deep breaths for calm self-control with the child. Changing habits takes time. Be patient. Practice often.

Skill building is like house building. It takes one step at a time to build a solid foundation. It's more than worth it!

Janai Lowenstein, M.S., international trainer, author, kids' TV producer and host, is the director of the Self-Help Program and co-founder of the Counseling Living Foundation, Drain, Oregon. Website: [www.cliving.org/kidrelx.htm](http://www.cliving.org/kidrelx.htm)

Original publication date: 8/14/2000 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon