

Anger Management Games for Children

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Part One

Theoretical and practical background



Introduction

What is anger management?

Imagine the following scene: Brenda is preparing to walk with her three-year-old son, Ryan and her daughter Hayley (seven) to Hayley's school. They normally go by car but today they have to get the bus. They are running late because Hayley can't find her shoes. Brenda dresses Ryan while calling instructions to Hayley. They set off to the bus stop. Hayley is chatting to her mum about school but Brenda is pre-occupied with Ryan who doesn't want to hold her hand and keeps pulling away from her. They walk past the park and Ryan sees the swings. He suddenly screeches 'No! No more walk!' and sits down on the pavement kicking his legs furiously. He manages to kick his mum as she tries to pick him up. Brenda shouts at Ryan. Hayley starts to cry and throws down her book bag with such force that her reading book falls out and lands in a puddle.

It is conceivable that Hayley might have a pretty miserable start to her school day! Ryan may quickly forget his frustration if he is distracted and reassured, but his sister is old enough to brood on the various events of the morning. Her thoughts may fuel anxiety (Will I get into trouble because of the reading book? Will I be late for school?) and feelings of anger (It's Ryan's fault, he gets all the attention). These mixed emotions may in turn affect her concentration and performance in the classroom and may even lead to an uncharacteristic display of anger toward another child. In this instance 'Super Mum' Brenda retrieves the situation with a bit of expert mothering! She hugs Ryan, acknowledges his frustration and distracts his attention from the swings. She simultaneously cuddles Hayley, apologizes for not paying attention to her (she is, after all, 'Super Mum!'), rescues the book, acknowledges Hayley's feelings of anxiety, reassures her, and still manages to get everyone to the bus stop on time!

The anger and frustration felt by Hayley, Ryan and Brenda are all normal responses to an accumulation of events. Anger management strategies were put into place quickly and Ryan and Hayley learned the value of self-calming through their mother's support and model. Of course, anger management is not always as easy as

Brenda might have us think! However, such common scenarios illustrate three important points for consideration:

- Anger is a normal, healthy human emotion.
- Young children need help in learning how to manage feelings of anger successfully.
- Anger in children is not something to be feared, denied or repressed.

These points are explored in more depth in Chapter 2: Understanding anger. I believe that they should inform our interactions with all children – those who are coping with normal levels of anger as well as those who are experiencing anger frequently, inappropriately or too intensely or whose anger lasts for long periods of time.

In order to help children to understand and manage angry feelings successfully we must also be aware of our own strengths and needs in relation to this emotion and be prepared to examine our personal beliefs about how to manage it appropriately. With these aims in mind, *Anger Management Games for Children* sets out to explore some of the information now available to us about anger, its origins and its consequences. It offers ways for adults to develop or increase their ability to feel comfortable with children's anger and to reflect on their interactions with children, and it shows how youngsters can learn the skills for anger management through a natural childhood activity: playing games.

Who will benefit from anger management games?

The games are suitable for all children from 5–12 years of age. In the school setting they will fit into a wide selection of personal, social and health education (PSHE) and other learning objectives. They can be used to teach and enhance a variety of skills at primary level and to reinforce strategies for anger management during the vulnerable period of transition to secondary education. The material can be incorporated into individual behaviour plans (IBPs) and can be used to target specific aspects of individual education plans (IEPs).

Children attending after school clubs, youth groups and play schemes will also enjoy and benefit from engaging in the activities and crucially, all the games can be played at home by families.

The material will also complement intervention methods used in a diverse range of therapy approaches with individual children or groups, including existing anger management strategies. *However, the games alone should not be viewed as a substitute for professionally led anger management programmes when children have been assessed as having severe or complex emotional needs.*

Why use non-competitive games?

I have chosen to focus on non-competitive games where the enjoyment and the challenge come from the process itself rather than from winning. This is not because I have an aversion to competitive games. In fact, far from this being the case, I do believe that there is a place for these once a child is ready to engage in them and does so by her own choice. The child's world is after all a competitive arena and most children will naturally play games of skill that involve winning or losing or being 'in' or 'out' whether we adults encourage them or not. Younger children and those who are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem will often find these win or lose games extremely difficult to cope with, however. For such children, the anticipation of the 'rewards' of winning might be so great that the disappointment of losing has an equally dramatic effect on their mood. In order to enjoy and benefit from competitive games they will therefore need to first develop a certain degree of emotional resilience, competence and self-efficacy, all of which can be fostered initially through non-competitive activities.

How to use this book

The games and activities are divided into nine sections, including warm-ups and wind-downs. In some instances the division is slightly arbitrary since many of the games could be placed in more than one section and you will find that you are often touching on several aspects of anger management within just one game. However, if you keep the principal focus in mind this will help you to evaluate and adapt individual games appropriately.

Each game has been marked with a set of symbols to aid in the selection of the most appropriate ones for different groups of children:

- ☺ This gives an indication of the suggested *youngest* age for playing the game. There is no upper age limit.
- ⌚ 10 mins An approximate time is given for the length of the game (excluding the discussion time). This will obviously vary according to the size of group and the ability of the players.
- ↑ ↑ ↑ Indicates that the game is suitable for larger groups (eight or more).
- ↑ ↑ The game is suitable for small groups.
- ☞ ☞ ☞ The game involves a lot of speaking unless it is adapted.
- ☞ ☞ A moderate amount of speaking is required by players.
- ☞ The game is primarily a non-verbal game or one requiring minimal speech.
- 👂 listening This gives an indication of a skill used or developed by playing this game.

The lists of skills for each game have been limited to just a few key areas, but you may find that you want to add others relevant to your own focus of work. Undoubtedly, the more often that you play these games, the more skills you will want to add to each list!

Adaptations

Ideas for expanding and adapting the games are offered as a starting point for your own experimentation with the main themes. Most games can be adapted appropriately to enable children with diverse strengths and needs to take part. Older children should also be given plenty of opportunities to adapt games by inventing new versions or altering the rules in discussion with other group members. This helps them to understand the value of rules and to distinguish more easily between what works and what doesn't. Discussion with peers also provides valuable experience of negotiating and developing flexibility in decision making. It is of course important to make it clear beforehand that there are certain safety and non-discriminatory rules governing the invention or changing of games which must be followed.

Reflections and notes

Suggestions for reflection and for discussion with older children are provided after each game description. Sometimes even the briefest time spent in reflecting on behaviour and feelings or on actions and consequences can help children to make enormous leaps in realization. Equally, children who play games regularly will often start to gain insights into their own behaviour and emotions and those of others purely through the experience, and will not necessarily need to take specific time to reflect on what happened within every session.

As a general principle I would suggest that we should not give more time to a discussion at the time of playing than we do to the game itself. However, these topics do also provide an opportunity for drawing links between different themes at later times. You could remind children of particular games when this is relevant: 'Do you remember when we played that game of... What did you feel when...?'

The suggestions for discussion can also provide focus points for you to use during your own planning and reflection sessions (see pages 47–49 for further guidelines). To aid this process, each game description includes space for you to add your own notes. These might include such things as personal insights and experiences of using the games, personal preferences, dislikes, problems and successes.

Additional notes

Finally, because you will undoubtedly have many more games in your repertoire and will gather extra ideas from colleagues and children, each section ends with a blank

summary page for 'additional notes'. Here you can add to your list and make any further general comments on your experiences with the games you have used.

My hope is that this format will encourage reflective practice but that it will not discourage enjoying the pure fun of playing games with young children. This, after all, is the essential value of games – having fun while learning about ourselves and others!

Integrating games into different settings

The ways in which the games are adapted and incorporated into family life and into educational and therapy approaches can and should vary according to the setting and according to the needs, strengths and experiences of the children. Each adult who facilitates games will naturally bring his or her own personality, imagination, expertise and knowledge to the games and create something new from the basic format. In this way, playing with the process of playing becomes an integral part of our own learning.

However, the games in this book do follow a logical progression. If you are structuring games sessions based specifically around anger management, I therefore suggest that each session starts with a warm-up game, followed by two or three games from one of the outlined sections (or from two consecutive sections), and finishing with a relaxation/wind-down game.

Warm-ups and ice-breakers foster group cohesion and help to develop a group identity. They encourage children to interact with each other, and help them to feel that they have been acknowledged by everyone else. They act as a ritual to mark the beginning of a session and to ensure that each person has fully 'arrived' in the group.

The relaxations and wind-downs emphasize the skills involved in managing levels of emotion and teach simple strategies for 'letting go' of any left over feelings which may have manifested during earlier games and discussions, or which may arise in the future. This combination is important because children need to feel safe and contained when they are exploring emotions. The structure of a games session can facilitate this by providing predictability and certainty.

Further guidelines for facilitating the games can be found in Chapter 4: Structuring the emotional environment.

Facing up to anger

The conscious control of anger is a complex process and we cannot expect children to manage this without support and guidance. Aristotle summed up this conundrum very succinctly:

Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy. (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (cited in Goleman 1996))

The task for adults is to recognize the need for all children to develop a healthy approach to anger management and to take up the challenge!

Understanding anger

Key points

- Anger is a normal, healthy human emotion.
- Young children need help in learning how to manage feelings of anger successfully.
- The foundations for emotional regulation are laid down in infancy.
- The way in which a child interprets situations and events has important implications for anger management.
- Anger in children is not something to be feared, denied or repressed.
- Most anger occurs in the context of a trigger event or is secondary to another underlying emotion.
- There are several core elements which are crucial to the development of healthy anger management in childhood.



Anger is a normal, healthy human emotion.

For many of us, 'childhood anger' conjures up images of aggression and of children who are 'out of control' or 'disaffected' or 'troubled'. We are bombarded with images and stories of such aggression on an almost daily basis, and teachers will be all too aware of the thousands of children who face school exclusion every year because of disruptive behaviour.

It is unfortunate that in this climate, fear of the consequences of unrestrained anger has led many adults to become anxious about coping with *any* displays of anger, even that of very young children. This much misunderstood emotion has seemingly become the 'bad apple' of the emotions' family, something to be controlled, eradicated or suppressed.

But of course, what we are talking about here is the inappropriate *manifestation* of angry feelings. Anger in itself is not necessarily an unwelcome emotion. In fact, it can sometimes be a force for positive change. When it is expressed appropriately and meaningfully it can be a perfectly normal and healthy response to injustice, for example, and can act as an energizer and a motivator for action. Anger is also a basic survival response that enables us to react instantly to threatening situations and to defend ourselves in times of crises.

We must also remember that the word 'anger' covers a whole range of emotional intensity including mild irritation or frustration. It is therefore something that we are likely to come across in others or to experience in ourselves on a fairly regular basis. If we handle it successfully then we can help children to understand that anger need not be a frightening, unpredictable or overwhelming experience and that they do have the capacity to control this emotion in a productive and healthy manner.

Young children need help in learning how to manage feelings of anger successfully.

It is clear that anger management strategies must do much more than simply offer ways of controlling or suppressing angry outbursts. The challenge for adults is to help children to develop the key skills and capacities for emotional regulation – a task which starts in babyhood and continues throughout the early years. As children learn to negotiate the world we can help them to develop skills of empathy and cooperation, support their growing ability to tolerate frustration, and help them to develop appropriate strategies for self-calming when they are anxious. With these foundations in place children will then be more able to channel justified anger into appropriate responses and to recognize and defuse inappropriate manifestations of this powerful emotion.