

Sometimes When

I'm Mad



Deborah Serani, Psy.D. • illustrated by Kyra Teis

free spirit
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For Rebecca



Sometimes when I'm mad, it's
because everything goes wrong.



I spill my milk.



I can't find my favorite toy.



My friend doesn't
come over to play.



Mama says we all get mad. Sometimes when we're mad, it's because we can't control what's happening.

She says I can focus on what I can control. When my friend doesn't come over, Mama names two things I could do instead and asks me to pick one. "Do you want to do a puzzle or play a game?"



HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH ANGER

A Guide for Caring Adults

Anger is an intense emotion. It is a natural response to certain issues or situations, yet is often felt or expressed in ways that are scary, confusing, or even unhealthy. Many people consider anger a “bad” emotion and view its expression as destructive. As a result, experiencing anger can be difficult for both children and adults. Indeed, anger is a feeling most people prefer *not* to experience. But when we understand anger, it can become a healing, transformative, and empowering force.

Most children require guidance, support, and instruction as they learn to identify and regulate angry emotions. It’s not always easy for little ones to understand feeling mad. Among children, difficulties with anger are linked to physical experiences like headaches, stomach pains, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and appetite and sleeping problems. *Maladaptive* anger—anger that is unmanaged or highly aggressive—is also linked to academic difficulties, social and emotional delays, anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, and family stress. However, when children are able to express anger in *adaptive* ways, they can find solutions to problems, create structure and healthy rules for themselves and others, build self-confidence, and experience greater physical and emotional well-being.

While we want children to be able to express their anger, we also want to help them release these feelings in constructive ways. It’s equally important to show children how to repair social connections and self-esteem when angry feelings come out in muddled or messy ways. *Sometimes When I’m Mad* helps children understand how anger feels, what it looks like, how to cope with it, and how unresolved experiences can trigger it. By reading this book, you’ll help little ones learn to identify their feelings. Children will also be better able to notice when factors like hunger, fatigue, or disappointment are contributing to angry feelings.

HOW TO SPOT ANGER IN CHILDREN OF VARIOUS AGES

Anger looks different in children of varying ages. And of course, every child is unique in personality and expression. However, children do tend to demonstrate certain patterns at different developmental stages. Knowing these patterns can help you better understand and support the children you care for.

Infants: While newborns may express irritability and frustration, these expressions are generally not emotionally triggered, but rather needs-based. Feeling cold, hungry, wet, frightened, or tired will set into motion an irritable cry response from a baby. As newborns age, they become more socially and emotionally aware of their world. Babies begin to truly express anger at about six months. They may respond angrily with fussing, biting, and crying directed toward things or people who thwart their goals or fail to meet undetected needs—from dropping a toy or bottle to feeling discomfort.



Toddlers: Since toddlers often don’t have the language to express what they’re feeling, they typically express anger physically. It’s common for them to display a variety of aggressive behaviors when they’re mad, including crying, stomping, hitting, pushing, or breaking things. Toddlers frequently tantrum, having an average of nine tantrums a week. As toddlers gain more language and body control, they can learn to express their anger in more adaptive ways. But in general, this age group tends to struggle with angry feelings and behaviors.

Preschool-age children: Preschoolers typically interact more with peers than toddlers do, moving from independent play to socialized play. As preschoolers are still acquiring language skills and not always able to manage emotions, they can be easily frustrated when asked to share, take turns, or make transitions. They then express this frustration and anger in outward ways. Preschoolers often display anger in tantrums, meltdowns, and physical aggression like hitting, throwing, and even biting. Preschoolers may also experience aches and pains and other physical irritability as part of anger.

School-age children: Like younger children, school-age children often display anger through hitting, throwing, or breaking things. In fact, physical expressions of anger typically peak during this time. But as children develop greater language skills, they may also use verbally aggressive words and phrases to express anger. At the same time, as children get older and grow in emotional awareness, they learn how to regulate their emotions. They also become more reflective about angry emotions. They *feel* angry first, then *act*. Some children manage angry feelings successfully, while others may need additional guidance.



WAYS TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHY ANGER EXPRESSION

Helping children understand their own unique responses to anger—as well as *why* they are feeling angry—builds their social and emotional skills and resilience. They can then respond to their anger prosocially. Here are some ways adults can encourage healthy anger expression.

- Help children understand that anger is natural, everyone feels it, and it will pass. Acknowledge that feeling angry can be uncomfortable.
- Treat children’s feelings—even ones that are inappropriately expressed—with respect.
- Help children learn positive and productive ways to express anger. Show them how to shake off irritability by doing jumping jacks or bouncing a ball outside. Teach