

# LIONS, TIGERS, & BEARS

## Rules of Engagement with an Angry Child

*"The truth about rage is that it only dissolves when it is really heard and understood, without reservation." - Carl Rogers*

**FACT:** When we feel threatened, we move into fight, flight or freeze. Anger is the body's "fight" response.

### Rules of Engagement with an Angry Child

1. **Start with yourself.** – Before engaging a child's emotional state, take a quick inventory of your own. Are you calm? Are you focused? Do you have all the information you need to support them?
2. **De-escalate.** – A child, or any person, is incapable of reason, logic, and other cognitive processing while in the throes of high emotion.
  - Amygdala (Temporal Lobe)-controls emotion
  - Prefrontal Cortex (Cerebral Cortex)-controls thinking and processing

\*You have to turn down the volume of one before the other can be heard when a child is engaged in extreme emotion.
3. **Remember that all feelings are valid and allowed.** – Our instinct is to put out the fire, but that not only has the exact opposite effect with a young child, it communicates to a child that their feeling is wrong, instead of the inappropriate action that followed the feeling. We can acknowledge their feelings without validating an undesired behavior.
4. **Give children appropriate ways to manage angry impulses in the moment.** – We agree that our goal is not to change the feeling, but to change the behavior, we have to offer alternative outlets for anger and teach them how to use them.
  - Feelings Training & Fire Drills-In the same way we "train" for a real fire by practicing our responses regularly, we need to "train" for the real emotional fires by practicing our responses when the explosive or disruptive emotions come. Using tools like role play, dramatic acting, exploration of feelings and what they make our bodies behave like, etc. will prepare children to better manage the real thing when it comes...and it will!
  - Teach her to use her "PAUSE" button by breathing in for four counts through her nose, and then out for eight through her mouth.
  - Grab two squishy balls; hand her one, and demonstrate working out annoyance on the squishy ball.
  - Put on music and do "an angry dance."
  - To keep from hitting, kids can clap their arms around their bodies (so each hand ends up on the opposite shoulder or side) and yell something like "Mom!" or "Stop!"
  - Young children often find it helpful to stomp their feet when they're mad. Don't worry, it's better than kicking a friend or the wall, and over time they will start using words.

- With a child who is a bit older, you can suggest that she draw or write on paper what she is angry about, and then fiercely rip it into tiny pieces.

One note about expressing the anger physically. Remember that what's healing isn't acting out the aggression, which can actually make the person angrier. The body may benefit from discharging tension, but that could happen from dancing. What's really helpful for a child is that he gets to show you just how upset he is, so he feels understood. So, if a child wants to clobber something (in lieu of acting out his anger toward a person), say *"You are showing me just how mad you are about this! I see! Wow!"*

5. **Don't send a child away to "calm down" by themselves.** - Your goal when a child is angry or upset is to restore a sense of safety, which requires your calm presence. Remember that children need love most when they "deserve it least." Instead of a "time out," which gives kids the message that they're all alone with these big, scary feelings, try a "time in," during which you stay with the child and help him move through his feelings. You'll be amazed at how a child begins to show more self-control when you adopt this practice, because he feels less helpless and alone.
6. **Restore Connection.** -An angry child needs to know that you understand and are there to help.
  - If you know what's going on, acknowledge it: "You are angry that your tower fell."
  - If you don't know what's going on, describe what you see: "You are crying so hard...I see how upset you are." Give the child permission to have their feelings: "It's okay, everyone needs to cry, (or get angry or frustrated) sometimes. I will stay right here while you show me your mad (or sad)." If possible and permissible, touch his shoulder or arm to maintain connection.
  - If he yells at you to go away, say: "You want me to go away. I will step back a bit. I will be right here when you are ready for a hug (or to join your friends/an activity). I won't leave you alone with these big feelings."

The restoring connection part is important enough to get assistance with managing the rest of the class if needed, so you can be present with the angry child and help them through the process. In real-time, it is only a few minutes of the day, but getting these few minutes right can impact the quality of the rest of the day.

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR KIDS ON HANDLING ANGER

- **I Am So Angry, I Could Scream: Helping Children Deal with Anger** by Laura Fox, Chris Sabatino
- **How to Take the GRRRR Out of Anger** by Elizabeth Verdick, Marjorie Lisovskis
- **When Miles Got Mad** by Sam Jurtzman-Counter, Abbie Schiller
- **Silly Simon Simmons Super Frustrating Day** by Sam Jurtzman-Counter, Abbie Schiller

Resource: [www.ahaparenting.com](http://www.ahaparenting.com)