

The Validation of Anger

Anger is one of the basic emotions experienced by all. For an emotion to run its course, it needs to be expressed and validated. Suppressed or incomplete anger is particularly toxic. It fuels mental health symptoms like anxiety, depression, OCD and eating disorders - even self-harm behaviors and suicidality. Supporting the expression of your child's anger can be an incredibly powerful tool for healing. In fact, by helping your child to off-load anger, you can expect to see a fairly immediate reduction in symptoms. It will also make it less likely that they will act out their anger physically or with aggression.

If it's so important, why is it so hard to validate my child's anger?

We're human. When someone expresses anger towards us, our automatic reaction is to become defensive. The capacity to remain calm, open and non-defensive in the face of a child's anger is nothing short of a super-power – especially when that anger is directed towards us. Parents have also been taught for generations that anger from children is disrespectful and should not be tolerated. As a result, when our kids are angry, we often feel the need to shut it down. The problem is that children who struggle to express assertive anger are more likely to be bullied or dismiss their needs to avoid conflict. Children who are explosive can also benefit from validation to help calm their “brainstorm” and find more appropriate ways of communicating that all is not well. Typically, when a child begins to yell or use provocative language, it usually means they do not feel heard and reflects a need for validation and connection. In fact, navigating anger together can promote a deepening of the relationship. Children also need to learn how to get angry, and move through anger, in order to navigate some of life's biggest challenges.

My child is always angry. Won't I be reinforcing this pattern?

Imagine that anger is like the air in a balloon. When you validate your child's anger, you slowly let the air out of the balloon. In other words, the child's anger will slowly dissipate and so too will their symptoms. If your child is quick to anger, and angers often, you may discover that their anger serves to cover up deeper feelings of pain - including fear, loneliness, sadness or shame. Validating the anger will allow you to support your child with these vulnerable emotions. Doing so will lead to a further reduction in symptoms, among other positive outcomes.

My child doesn't seem angry at all. Are you sure this will work?

If your child is struggling with a mental health issue, including self-harm or suicidality, assume there is suppressed anger. You should also assume that they are afraid to be angry with you in case it negatively affects your relationship. The best way to “prove” to your child that it's ok to be angry with you is to help draw out their anger. Some parents have found it helpful to recall instances when 1. their child made attempts to express anger towards them or 2. it made sense for their child to be angry, but they did not express it. Go to your child and validate these experiences of anger. If your child denies having felt anger or dismisses your attempts - stay the course, especially if they tend to shy away from expressing this powerful feeling.

Validation Cheat-sheet:

I don't blame you for feeling anger when _____ because _____ and because _____.

Be sure to match your child's tone and volume, while ensuring the content is validating and supportive.