



Keep a cool head

An angry outburst from a child can put teachers in a difficult position. Lindsey Darking looks at what the experts recommend in order to diffuse such situations...

Teachers can find it hard to cope with anger in the primary classroom. They must deal not only with the feelings and actions of the angry child, but the health and safety of other pupils. They have to understand the triggers that sparked the angry outburst as well as the sanctions that should be applied. The reactions of peers must be taken into account, as well as the teacher's own feelings and responses when faced with angry situations.

A well-thought-out anger management strategy can therefore be invaluable. This can encompass things such as the whole school environment, where staff model positive, supportive and co-operative relationships to the pupils, as well as a physical environment conducive to learning and good behaviour.

It should include a clear system of rewards and sanctions for positive versus hostile or aggressive behaviour, consistently applied throughout the school, as well as a strategy for handling crises. What to do in the aftermath of angry outbursts should also be included, such as debriefing and the provision of social skills and anger management training for individuals or groups.

Anger Management, a practical

guide (second edition, David Fulton, 2010), stresses that anger can sometimes be a positive force, but that 'problem' anger can be damaging both to the individual and others. In the long term it can lead to difficulties with learning, with physical and mental health, and in relationships with peers.

The psychological roots of anger are complex, and can stem from learned behaviour, frustration, actual or perceived threat, low self-esteem, repressed, projected or displaced feelings, ineffective parenting or even genetic predisposition.

A firework model has been used to explain how anger develops, with the 'trigger', like a match, being the behaviour that lights the fuse. This reacts with the thoughts and feelings of the individual child to create a physical and emotional reaction, the 'explosion'.

Teachers can use this model to help them cope with anger in the classroom, by first watching for signs of developing anger in vulnerable children and then taking prompt action to 'avoid the storm'. Dealing carefully and safely with the 'explosion' can prevent the situation escalating, while sensitive handling of the aftermath can minimise the risk of the anger reoccurring.



Keep cool

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF ANGER MANAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM...

Do

- ✓ Think about your own feelings – What are my triggers? How does this child make me feel?
- ✓ Catch children being good – reward and praise good behaviour, rather than just seeing the bad
- ✓ Have clear rules and boundaries, with agreed sanctions for when these are broken
- ✓ Look for signs of escalating anger in children, such as changes to body posture, facial expression or physical agitation
- ✓ See the behaviour as the problem, not the child
- ✓ Use 'I' rather than 'you' messages to convey feelings and avoid blame. Instead of saying "You never bring a pen to class - why are you so disorganised?" say "When people don't bring their pen, I feel worried they won't get their work done."

Don't (In angry situations)

- ✗ Use provocative language, such as "Stop being childish"
- ✗ Use confrontational body language
- ✗ Use physical intervention, unless other methods have failed and there are risks to personal safety
- Ridicule the angry child
- ✗ Apply sanctions, admonishment or criticism while the child is still angry

Scenario 1

Avoiding the storm

Leila has had spats with other girls in her class and may have problems at home. She is sometimes temperamental and challenging. In class you spot Rosie, one of the girls, sniggering with her friends. They keep looking over at Leila. Leila seems increasingly agitated.

What to do:

- Reduce the triggers – find out later if Rosie and her friends are bullying or provoking Leila and use the school's bullying policy to deal with the situation.
- Defuse the situation – use distraction to try to stop Leila's anger from escalating. Change the activity she is doing or ask her to help you or to move to a different area of the classroom. Separate Rosie and her friends and give them other tasks to do.
- Help Leila with her anger – organise sessions with Leila after the class where you can help her work on her anger, for example by teaching her self-distraction and calming techniques, such as counting to ten, doing something physical, or visualisation. Use an 'angry log' and 'angry thermometer' to help her understand what makes her angry and how to avoid her 'triggers'.

Scenario 2

Handling the explosion

Kyle has always been challenging in class and is prone to angry outbursts. This morning he is especially moody. One of the other boys bumps into Kyle and he explodes with fury, shouting and pushing the other boy hard.

What to do:

- Remain controlled – stay rational rather than emotional, and control your own anger and anxiety. Use 'mood matching' to show Kyle you are concerned. Don't be overly calm or hysterical.

- Talk firmly with clear directions – tell him to stop pushing the other boy, and repeat the instructions several times. Loud noises, such as a whistle, can also be effective at distracting pupils out of their aggression.
- Protect other children – remove the other children to safety and if necessary seek help. Encourage the second boy to move away, but keep a safe distance from Kyle – violent people need more body space than others.
- Allow Kyle time to cool off – leave at least 45 minutes or an hour before working through the incident with Kyle, as outlined above and below.

Scenario 3

Dealing with the aftermath

Sam has been struggling with class work in recent weeks. Yesterday, when you asked him why he had not done his homework, he got angry and stormed out of the classroom.

What to do:

- Explore what's wrong – Sam's anger may indicate that he feels under threat. He may be having difficulties at home or with his learning. Listen carefully to his point of view. Work with him individually to help him understand and deal with his anger.
- Apply restorative justice – separate the person from the behaviour - let Sam know it was his actions that were unacceptable, rather than him, and that he is still a valued member of the class. Ask him what sanctions he thinks should be applied. Overly punitive approaches can make the perpetrator feel more aggrieved or angry.
- Work with the class – explore anger issues with the class. Allow pupils to think about the triggers to their own anger, and ways of calming themselves down. Use peer mediation and storytelling to help pupils explore problems and resolve conflicts.

Find out more

This article is based on advice that features in *Anger Management, a practical guide*, (second edition, David Fulton Books 2010). This detailed and comprehensive guide to coping with anger in the classroom is written by Adrian Faupel, Elizabeth Herrick and Peter Sharp - chartered psychologists with extensive experience in the field. For more information visit routledge.com/teachers