

Helping the Parents of an Angry Child



by Michael R. Emlet and David Powlison

An angry child creates huge disruption and provocation within a family. What is it like for a parent to experience open hostility, volatility, hatred, contempt, and violence from a child? It tempts that parent to react with his or her own forms of “returning evil for evil.” Some parents lash back, reacting in kind. They meet hostility with hostility, anger with anger. They act as if squashing a rebellion could eliminate rebelliousness. Other parents react from fear and despair. They placate, avoid the conflict, give in to manipulation. They act as if appeasing a strong will could make willfulness go away. In both cases, family problems escalate. Many parents end up feeling confused, overwhelmed, and even embittered. A child’s out-of-control anger easily becomes the dominating factor in a family’s life.

Pastors, family, friends, and other counselors are often called on for insight, advice, and encouragement. In this article we will offer seven basic building blocks that will help you to help others. These contribute to a parent’s growing understanding: of the child, of God, of himself/herself. They contribute to the ability to take practical action.¹

*Michael Emlet is counselor and faculty member at CCEF

David Powlison is editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling and counselor and faculty member at CCEF*

1. Identify with the parent’s experience.

Explosive anger is not a literal tornado, flood, or hurricane that leaves a trail of physical destruction and wrecked houses. But the emotional whirlwind leaves relational damage by wrecking homes and families—and sometimes causes physical destruction as well. Have you ever felt a literal or figurative whirlwind ripping through your home? Counselors who answer yes can readily identify with parents who feel worn out, confused, and frustrated. They walk on eggshells, afraid that at any moment the child will explode in anger over something minor. They are desperate for answers to questions such as these:

- “How can I restore sanity to this utter chaos?”
- “How can I prevent these terrible anger storms in my child?”
- “Why does this rage seem to explode out of nowhere?”
- “Will there ever be real peace in our home, or will bickering, quarreling, fighting, and angry outbursts continue to be the norm?”

Those are painful questions even to pose. People look for honest hope and real help—but inwardly they may despair. You must appreciate the difficulty and trouble these parents face. Thoughtful counseling always incarnates into the anguish and turmoil of the human condition. You must sympathize with others’ weaknesses if you are to offer help tailored to their time of need,

dealing gently even with the ignorant and wayward (cf., Heb. 4:14-5:8). Enter into the situation the parents face, into their perplexity, and into their desires for change.

First, they face trouble. We have all heard parents who laughingly comment in retrospect about how their Johnny was “quite a handful.” But a volatile child is more than a mere handful. For a parent, family life becomes like driving the streets of Baghdad. An improvised explosive device might go off at any moment. There are no easy answers to behaviors that are persistently disruptive and destructive. As a counselor, do you have a feel for the degree of chaos that these parents face?

Second, they feel overwhelmed by the trouble. Parents know they need more than a dose of standard childrearing advice. They may be in despair about their abilities as parents. They may feel hatred for this child who causes them so much pain and misery. They may be fearful of what the future holds. They may wish they could bail out, and regret even giving birth or adopting this child. There are no quick solutions to what a parent finds so deeply disheartening. Do you understand the sense of personal vulnerability expressed in such questions?

Third, they long for something that realistically seems impossible. These parents deeply desire help. But there is no “If you just do _____, everything will work out” for such disturbing patterns. Do you feel the weight of what they are asking? Restoration of what is lost. Prevention of what is now omnipresent. Understanding of what seems incomprehensible. Peace where there is only disturbance. These are difficult achievements.

When anger typifies a child’s life, how can you help parents to respond constructively? You must first enter into their situation. Then you will not underestimate what they face. Feel the weight of their dismay with them. They will know that you care, and you will not be tempted to dash off a prescription list of rash answers and empty promises. When you understand the seriousness of their questions, then your response will come with the appropriate thoughtfulness, patience, and gravitas. You will not only offer advice (that is needed). You will also realize—will know first hand—that these parents, like you, need to seek and find God Himself in the midst

of their troubles. Big troubles become occasions to know, to need, and to love our saving Lord more deeply. There is advice to offer. But such questions are also cries for nothing less than a salvation from all that is broken, sinful, and painful. Good advice, carefully implemented, heads in the direction of that salvation. But God always ensures that we need *Him*.

As a counselor, you know up front that “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” This child’s hostility and volatility is a serious problem. And you also know up front that God’s goal is for us to become “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (James 1:19-20). That is His aim, your aim, the parents’ aim, for this very child. But getting from here to there is a hard road. Parents need to know that you are in it with them. Then you’ll be in a position to help them to help their child turn into that good road.

2. Help parents think clearly about the source of disproportionate anger.

Not all anger is wrong. As we read the Bible, we learn how God’s anger is holy, just, and loving, both in its motive and actions. For Christians, it is appropriate—necessary, even—to experience anger about injustices and sins that rightfully anger God. Because we are being renewed into God’s image, it’s possible to experience anger at wrong, and not to sin (Eph. 4:26, and various biblical examples of justified anger in action). The right sort of anger motivates constructive action to address a true wrong. But almost always, the sort of anger outbursts we are considering are not honoring to God, either in heart orientation (“I want what I want and you can’t stop me”) or in behavioral expression (tantrums, disrespectful speech, hitting). This article is specifically concerned with helping the parents of children who are habitually angry, oppositional, and defiant.

Like all of our emotions, anger does not come “out of the blue” (although it sometimes seems like that). Emotions don’t just happen *to* a child. They are what he *does* and *experiences*. Emotions express his heart before God as he reacts to some circumstance. In other words, our emotions are tied to our hearts, the inner nature that is living either for God or against God in every moment. What is in our heart towards God directly affects every emotion, word, and action.

Explosive anger not only attacks parent and siblings. It is a revelation of a self-willed heart that attacks God by asserting “My will be done right now in this universe!” Notice what God says about the way our hearts connect to everything we do and say:

- “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). Anger is always revelatory of who we are.
- “Now the works of the flesh are evident: ... enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions” (Gal. 5:19-20). These angry attitudes and destructive actions flow from a heart set against God. The “lusts of the flesh” seize control, usurping the “desires of the Spirit.”

changed into people who love God and others. The imperious, willful heart can be gentled by God’s mercy and power. Knowing the source of the problem helps parents to clarify the long term goal that their child comes to live increasingly under Christ’s kingly will and within His saving love.

3. Help parents to aim at reaching the child’s heart with God’s grace.

Since the child’s heart is the source of his anger, to help him means to target the root cause. It is likely that a child will resist seeing his temper as coming from something wrong in his own heart. He will want to blame parents or circumstances for his angry outbursts. But a child needs to understand that he is responsible for his angry outbursts. No one causes another person to sin (James 1:13-15). He needs to understand that his outward behavioral eruptions are caused by inward cravings (James 1:14-15). And he needs to understand how God is merciful (James 1:16-

Targeting the heart means helping the child understand that her attitude, words, and actions violate God’s standards first and foremost.

- “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus puts murder and anger in the same category—with the same consequences—because both issue from the same kind of heart.

In the Bible God teaches us how to understand the inward origin of anger. This means that helping angry children involves more than anger management techniques. To solve your child’s anger problem you must target the source of his anger—his heart.

Knowing that out-of-control anger comes from a child’s heart should fill parents with hope. This child is not emotionally damaged, genetically damned, and incapable of change. Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that all kinds of people, including little children with very angry hearts, could be

18). God does oppose the proud (and anger outbursts are about as flagrant an example of pride as one will ever see), but He will indeed give grace to the humble (James 4:1-12). In recognizing responsibility, the door of hope opens.

A child needs to learn how her anger operates directly against God. Too often parents only focus on the horizontal aspect of their child’s sinful behavior—what the child has done to them. Targeting the heart means helping the child understand that her attitude, words, and actions violate God’s standards first and foremost. To be self-willed is to assault God’s right to rule. This God-ward focus keeps the gospel front and center, because sin against God and others has a remedy. If we confess our sins honestly, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us (1 John 1:9). Opening up the vertical dimension presents the immediate relevance of the gospel.

Targeting the heart also involves seeking to understand the “whys” behind angry outbursts. It’s not as simple as, “Well, he’s a little sinner and he wants his own way!” That’s a general truth

about all human beings. We need to uncover the particulars of what *this* child's 'own way' consists in. Every human action and reaction reveals motives, if we know to look and ask. Ask God to guide you by His Spirit, so you will have the biblical wisdom to search for what is really going on in the child's heart when he is angry. Then ask these questions:

- What specifically does my child desire, want, fear, or crave in this moment? Sinful anger sends a loud message that some all-mastering desire is being frustrated.
- What specifically is my child not believing about God's character, actions, promises, and commands?
- What does my child believe right now—about his world, himself, and God—that makes his reaction seem completely logical and justified to his own mind?

gospel. It means *living* that gospel, as well as speaking it. Clarity on these matters helps parents to become simultaneously more firm and more patient, more clear, and more compassionate. The anger outburst is wrong and destructive. The desires behind it are imperial and dictatorial. God's grace meets our need for mercy and help. A parent learns to communicate that this child can reach to a Savior who loves him, forgives him when he sins, and promises to provide help in the midst of temptation to anger (Heb. 2:18; 1 Cor. 10:13). Parents must not forget, when asking their child to control his anger, that they are asking him to do something *supernatural* and *impossible* on his own. So helping him build a trusting relationship with Jesus is vital. Only as he learns to depend on Jesus will he have the reasons, desires, and strength to obey (Col. 3:1-10). As his relationship with Jesus grows, so will his ability to control his angry behavior. The parent's goals must not only be to make a son or

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There is no deeper cause. There is no more profound question for a child and parents to learn to answer. The answers to those questions will help parents craft a wise, heart-oriented response that does more than attempt to externally control a child's anger through punishment, threats, rewards, or distractions. It brings parents tremendous hope to learn that they can patiently help their child grow in self-understanding. Perhaps they've never thought about this possibility. They've heard about and tried techniques to control, appease, punish, or anesthetize their child's anger. They've never learned how to help their child grow wise. As a child grows to understand how her desires and beliefs fuel her destructive anger, then a parent can point her to Jesus for specific help. He promises to pour out mercy and grace to help in her 'time of need' (Heb. 4:16). The upsetting events of daily life are a prime time of need for help.

Targeting a child's heart means telling a child, again and again, the good news of the

daughter easier to live with right now. A wise parent aims to help a child to establish and to sustain a relationship with the living God that will bring him life, love, meaning, joy, and purpose that will last forever.

4. Help parents to understand a child's weaknesses.

Just as you teach your child to understand the desires and motives of her heart and to bring her heart to Jesus, so it is also very important to understand your child's weaknesses. Our physical bodies come with a mix of abilities and disabilities. God arranges both our potential and our limitations. Similarly, the child's social circumstances present a mix of positives and negatives. Like adults, children experience both hostility and blessing from the hands of others. Their lives contain both joys and sorrows, both opportunities and threats. These bodily and social factors are part of the complete picture in understanding and helping an angry child. Considering the heart gives a *deeper* understanding of anger problems. Considering

the situational factors that are in play gives a *wider* understanding. Parents become more patient, compassionate, and creative in their dealings as they are able to take more factors into account. For starters, it will help them recognize particular forms of temptation to which their children are vulnerable. Parents must become students of their child's particular weaknesses (and strengths), if they are to help their child in the most appropriate ways.

Consider, for example, some specific brain-based weaknesses. Research suggests that there are some typical characteristics of children who tend toward explosive anger.² (As an aside, a child who internalizes anger through brooding, escapism, and avoidance of conflict has presumably been given a different physical package, so the sin nature works out in a different form.) What are some of those characteristics?

- Difficulties with short term memory
- Decreased ability to organize and plan
- Difficulty with multi-tasking
- Being a “black and white” thinker (i.e. rigidity in problem solving—“there’s only one way to do this” rather than flexibility—“there are several ways to approach this problem”)
- Problems shifting quickly from one situation or set of expectations to another
- Difficulty in expressing oneself verbally
- Certain weaknesses in social skills (e.g. difficulty recognizing nonverbal cues; difficulty understanding how one is coming across to another person)

These potential weaknesses are not sin issues. They may predispose the child to respond in an explosive way when he is challenged or frustrated, but these are not sins in and of themselves. They are the inbuilt aspect of a child's characteristic temptations: matters of temperament, relative abilities and disabilities. (For example, children prone to fears, shyness, and over compliance have a different characteristic set of temptations.) When these particular weaknesses are present, so is the temptation for a child to become extremely frustrated and to lose control. Temptation is not the final cause of sin; it provides the circumstance, provocation, and occasion for sin.

Ask parents if they see their child struggling

in any of these (or related) areas. Work with parents to review the list of characteristics that are typical of many violently angry children. Does the child struggle with some (or all) of these weaknesses? If so, parents need to tailor their approach accordingly. The challenge is to teach a child to ask God and others for immediate help, instead of throwing a temper tantrum. Both parents and child learn the topography of *this* child's battlefield in life. Physiological factors are a wider category than these we've described as brain-based endowment. Other significant body-based factors include allergies, sickness, fatigue, hunger, overheating, hormones, the pain of an injury. Any of these weakness factors can exacerbate the force of temptation. Conscious awareness of situations in which a child is tempted helps, in part, to defuse the blinding power of the temptation to react.

Consider this simple example of taking into account temperamental or physiological issues. If a child is tired and/or hungry, that should affect the approach. It doesn't mean parents ignore defiance simply to avoid a fight. It doesn't mean the child has an excuse for losing it. But awareness *may* mean forbearing (overlooking) the offense in the present (Pr. 19:11), and talking about it later when the child is well rested or fed. Or parents may decide that the offense is serious enough to warrant intervention in the present despite the physical weakness of the child. But they will do that with compassion. Their admonishment will be richer and more informative, as they consider on this background factor. They are aware of many factors in the child's current state, not only the sin, and this can help the child grow in wisdom and self-control.

The body is not the only locus of weakness and temptation. Consider also the great variety of situational factors that may influence/occasion an eruption of anger and the violence of that eruption. If a child has been subject to cruel teasing and bullying at school, home may be the place where the meltdown occurs. The death of a grandparent, a pet, or a friend may become an occasion for greater anger. A poor grade on a test, strains in a friendship, or disappointment at an audition or tryout—all these and more are important to understand if at all possible. Sometimes the angry child is inarticulate and unaware of what is going on. But parents ought to

be always looking out for clues to whatever else might be immediately going on in the child's life and environment.

Here are several more subtle examples of background situational factors. Most school systems value and reward attentive, docile children. Some children are comfortable sitting for long stretches of time. They easily pay attention. They are good with words and symbols, and they like reading and math. But God has also made many children who are more mechanical or more social than cerebral, more concrete or interactive than abstract, more physically active than quiet. They will be continually frustrated by school. This mismatch between God-given traits and the values implicit in a classroom does not cause a temper tantrum at home later in the day. But the situation at school is a contributing factor, continually creating frustration and failure—a background of temptation.

him. For example, if a child has difficulty multi-tasking, instead of giving the broad command, "Go clean your room," a patient parent (and love is patient) can break it down into discrete steps. "Put your shoes away. OK, now make your bed. Here, I'll lift the mattress to help you tuck it in. OK, good, now put your stuffed animals onto the shelves. I love Phanty, your stuffed elephant. [tickle, tickle] How was your day? What was the best thing that happened? Any hard things that are bothering you inside?" In giving directions like this, parents tailor their ministry to the child. They take into account real limitations and weaknesses. They build a loving relationship, affirming the child's abilities and loves. They get the room clean. At the same time, they avoid an unnecessary confrontation. Or, vary the case. If that same child is also hungry after a long day, is angry and hurt at having been picked on in school, and is worried about having to face the bully tomorrow, then a more complex love will

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Or consider the situation of a boy who was adopted after living in a series of foster homes. That child's temper and violence certainly arise from his heart and express the demands, fears, and misbeliefs that rule him. But it is necessary to take into account his history of instability and abandonment. His sins—like every other person's sins—do not arise in a vacuum, but in a context. And God's grace always takes into account a suffering person's context even as it provides a remedy for sinful responses in the midst of that context. Awareness of that context makes an important contribution to a parent's patience and perseverance, to wisdom in discipline, and to ability to maintain and communicate a gospel-centered perspective. Context does not excuse sin; it frames redemption. In the Bible, God's mercy comes to both sinners and sufferers, and sinner and sufferer always cohabit the same body!

A child is responsible before God to respond to wise parental instruction (Eph. 6:1). Building parents' understanding of their child's weaknesses will help maximize their ministry to

get worked out as they share a snack, talk, and clean up the room. None of this guarantees there won't be a tantrum of angry self-will. But you are teaching parents how to love *this* child well and wisely.

5. Help parents to take the log out of their own eye.

The Bible richly instructs us that change takes place through a grace dynamic: before any of us can help others with their sins, we become familiar with facing and repenting of our own, finding the mercies of God (Matt. 7:3-5). This is so for would-be counselors. It is so for parents. Often a parent provokes a child to anger through inconsistency, aggression, preoccupation, unreasonable demands, or other failings. The Bible also acknowledges that one person can provoke another to anger or exacerbate existing anger:

- "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger..." (Eph. 6:4). This command assumes that there are things fathers (and

mothers!) do that frustrate and exasperate their children and create an occasion for their children to respond in anger.

- “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Pr. 15:1). Your response can either create a context that stirs up anger in your child or defuses anger.

Although we focus here on parents with an angry child, the child’s siblings or other relatives can also play a provocative role. The relatively ‘good’ child might skillfully push the buttons of the volatile ‘bad’ child. Miss Priss “starts it” through a selfish act, a mocking word, a lie, a toss of the head, doing exactly the small thing that lights the fuse of Master Disaster who then proceeds to get into big trouble. Or a grandmother might be sniping and sarcastic towards her grandchild. From the grandmother’s point of view, she’s only being helpful. From the child’s point of view, he’s being antagonized, tormented, and accused. He can’t even figure out the subtleties of her digs, which is even more frustrating because he feels stupid as well as dissed.

One sin never excuses another, so the volatile child who reacts with an outburst of violent anger is not justified. But the parent who wants to help must learn to deal well with everyone’s failings, whether in themselves or anyone else involved. What’s a parent to do? Here’s what the Bible says. In order to help an angry child, parents must honestly assess their own contribution to the family’s problem. Here are some questions by which parents can search their own hearts for ways that sinful attitudes, words, or actions might stir up anger in their child.

- Do you sometimes lose control when your child becomes angry?
- Do you and your spouse lose control with each other when you disagree?
- Do your expectations for your child vary from one day to the next?
- Do you discipline your child for something one day, and then don’t discipline him for the same thing another day?
- Do you apply different consequences to the same misbehavior?

- Are you typically preoccupied, busy, inattentive, and frazzled, so that you rarely connect with your child?

God is radically fair: “no respecter of persons” as Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 3:25 put it. He takes parental sins just as seriously as he takes children’s sins. And God’s grace is radically “unfair”: “He does not treat us as our sins deserve” (Ps. 103). And in the paradox of grace, parents who receive grace then have grace to give away. When any of us honestly deal with our own sin, it becomes possible to wisely, compassionately, and winsomely apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to another person’s sin, including the explosions of childish anger. As parents learn to bring their sins to the cross, they become able to help their child learn how to replace an angry lifestyle with a lifestyle of repentance and faith.

Living with an angry child is tiring and emotionally draining. It’s often hard to know what to do next and where to turn. But in the midst of difficult circumstances, parents must remember that they and their child are more alike than different. Both face particular temptations to sin. Both desperately need the forgiveness of sins that Jesus accomplished in being sacrificed on the cross. Both need the same power that raised Jesus from the dead in order to live in a new and peaceful way. Counselors who know these things first hand can communicate them to parents, who can go on and communicate them in words and in actions to angry children.

6. Help parents develop constructive practices for the long haul.

What can be done practically that will help a parent in daily interactions with a temperamental child? How can a parent discipline that child constructively, without provoking wrath needlessly? How can parents target the child’s heart *before* she disintegrates into rage? In this section we will discuss long-term goals and strategies. These create the basic atmosphere in a home. Learning to instruct and discipline without provoking means parents have to work hard in the following many areas. We will list four crucial ones, then present them as if we were teachers directly addressing parents.

First, consistency. Consistently practice what you preach. Be careful to treat your child

with the same respect and care that you want from her. If you often express the wrong kind of anger in your tone, your words, or your actions, your children will learn that such behavior is standard fare for your family, and they will resent being held to standards you don't keep.

Maintain consistency in expectations and rules. Decide on age-appropriate expectations for your child. If you don't know what they should be, ask for help from a wise friend whose children are older than yours. Then be clear about what you expect from your child and don't change your expectations from one day to another. Make sure you and your spouse agree on your expectations and rules. It is very confusing, provoking to anger, when a child hears different things from each parent. If parents cannot agree, then they need to seek wise counsel and strive to come to agreement.

Maintain consistency in discipline. You should have a plan for how you will respond to your child's misbehavior. Don't treat every

lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent" (Pr. 19:10). That proverb is obviously true in a child who explodes in wrath, bellowing falsehoods, accusations, demands, threats, self-righteousness. But it may be the parent's problem, too, sometimes in a more 'civilized' form, other times in the same naked forms of transgression. When parents barrage their child with words, it expresses their own apprehension or aggression or desire for control or self-righteousness. They may pontificate in a complicated monologue, or get into a complicated debate. They try to give all their reasons. They try to counter each of the child's stated or anticipated objections. They repeat themselves. They don't give a chance for response, or they don't listen, or they interrupt. They get overly emotional and irrational, or overly cold and logical. Instead, keep the truth simple, calm, clear, specific. Love has a disarming simplicity about it.

Third, dependency. You need God's aid, truth, mercy, power, protection. Live out that this

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offense of your child as a "10" on a scale of 1-10. It's easy when your child is out of control to simply react and discipline out of frustration. When you do that, discipline is often punitive, not restorative. To react to your child's anger with punitive hostility only furthers the state of war, and it only models that power wins. But godly discipline is informative. It teaches by actions (disciplinary consequences) and in words the difference between right and wrong. Godly discipline is restorative. It teaches, again both by actions (expressing love) and in words, that grace covers real sins.

Second, simplicity. Give your child simple and clear instructions and explanations. Speak in simple sentences, one sentence at a time, choosing carefully constructive words. Overloading the child with verbal directives, explanations, or admonitions might well precipitate a meltdown, and it will surely make a tantrum already in process a whole lot worse. "When words are many, transgression is not

is so. Repent in front of your child when you have not been consistent or simple. When you sin against your child, go to your child and explicitly confess your sin (James 5:16). Some parents are afraid that they will lose respect, authority, or control if they openly ask forgiveness. The opposite is true. Hypocrisy loses respect and the rest. Integrity and honesty win respect. Some parents are afraid that confessing their sins will make the child feel justified in his. The opposite is true. Self-righteousness tends to exacerbate self-righteousness; humility encourages humility; grace encourages grace. Ask your child to pray for you that God will help you to be a good parent. Let your child know that you are under God's authority, that you depend on Him for help, that you answer to Him for how you act. Show that this is so.

Model for your child in words and actions that he must also depend on God to change his heart and behavior. Make sure that discipline involves not only identifying the wrong heart

attitude and behavior, but also approaching Jesus in prayer for forgiveness and for the grace to obey in the future (1 Cor. 15:10).

Teach your child to pray. Prayer expresses dependence. It is a concrete reminder to your child that they also need resources beyond themselves for forgiveness and for obedience. Have a younger child repeat the phrases you pray, so they can build a “vocabulary of dependence.”

Fourth, interdependency. Get other wise, caring people involved with your child. Here is a striking fact. Children who grow up to walk in their own vibrant faith invariably have had *other* adults besides their parents who were active in their lives, whom they respected. Are there other adults who know your child, who take an interest, who connect enough to be up on significant events, who interact humorously, who give a thoughtful gift, who ask how they can pray? Whether you are a single parent or a married couple, don't go it alone. The well-known African proverb observes and exhorts, “It takes a village to raise a child.” God intends that the people of Christ become such a ‘village’ for each other. For one thing, you will probably notice that your child does not throw tantrums as frequently or as violently when other people are around. The incendiary behavior is a performance typically saved for the privacy of the nuclear family.

7. Help parents to develop a multi-faceted strategy for the heat of the moment.

Parents must always work on these broader issues just mentioned, but they also need a careful strategy for helping their child in the moment when she is tempted to lose control. What should you do when you ask your child to pick up her toys and she refuses? What do you do when the storm clouds of anger are brewing? Most parents only have two options in their response toolbox:

EITHER

stick to expectations for obedience no matter what. The strong-arm response usually results in a tantrum. Life becomes a battle over whose will wins out. The one who can generate the most brute force wins the day. Everybody loses.

OR

abandon, reduce, or change your expectations. The weakling response

usually keeps the peace. The child wins the day, and their anger ‘works’ to get what they want. Everybody loses.

With the right parental motives, either firmness or flexibility could be a wise and principled choice. On the one hand, there is a time to hold the line (while bearing in mind and bringing to bear all the things discussed in the previous pages!). But you are not after brute obedience and compliance. Too many other things are at stake. Your goals are a loving obedience, and while you insist on obedience, you are also pursuing wider and deeper goals. On the other hand, there is a time to be flexible (ditto the previous parenthesis). Consider whether another course of action would be more constructive. But at all costs, you cannot let the child's anger or threat of anger to control the interaction. Again, if you revise your expectation, it must be for reasonable reasons. Perhaps the original request was unreasonable or petty. Perhaps the timing needs to be altered, because something else clearly needs to be first in the queue. Perhaps you fired off an order without getting the child's attention first, and then got out of line yourself by immediately launching into argument mode.

Option one, insisting on your original command *could* be *your* own stubborn will and urge to dominate. Are you making an unreasonable demand? Treating your child in a demeaning way? Coming across as rigid and domineering?

Option two *could* be an expression of cowardice and confusion, allowing yourself to be bullied.

Other Strategies

What other strategies might you use? Here are several that parents can add to their response tool box.

1. Pause.

Give your child time alone, so she can regain self-control. This is not the same as a “time out,” where you isolate a child for a defined period of time as an act of discipline. Instead, this is a time for your child to calm down and reconsider her defiant attitude.³ Have your child sit until she is ready to re-engage in a respectful way, whether it is for one minute or thirty minutes. Perhaps you should do the same. The pause can help you both to cool down, and keep

you from overreacting and over disciplining in the heat of the moment. You can guide the child in what to think about, particularly as you build a positive history of constructive discipleship by doing the sorts of things this article has already described. This can be your time to think through your upcoming interaction with your child and pray for God to give you His wisdom.

As you pray for wisdom and ponder, you may well find that the conversation in fifteen minutes starts in a place that surprises your child. Perhaps it starts with a heartfelt affirmation of love, and then brings up the issue of obedience and the reasons for it. Perhaps it starts with a question: "Do you have any idea why Mommy asked you to do that?" Perhaps it starts with an observation about a weakness the child faces, or about a past time of growth in this area. You don't duck the problem, but you may get into it through a different door. When your child regains control remember to affirm her. In the Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32), Jesus affirms the son who initially refused to obey but then reconsidered and did what his father asked. For angry children—like angry adults—the present moment is all-consuming. A pause can give a bigger perspective to each party.

2. Use Humor or Laughter.

Sometimes a smile, a hug, or a tickle disarms your child, de-escalates a brewing battle, and allows you and your child to regroup and readdress the issue at hand. Consider this one form of the "gentle response" that turns away wrath (Pr. 15:1). You can only do this if your love is bigger than your dismay at the immediate situation. It's a radical way to change the immediate agenda of the situation. You switch gears to tackle the budding anger, rather than get stuck on the issue that is provoking anger. For example, the scowl begins to form on your daughter's face as you are talking about the need to clean up her room. You pause for a second and change the subject, saying, "Hon, do you remember that I love you?" with a twinkle in your eye. It's an invitation to become partners, an invitation to enter into loving relationship. You are not backing off from clean up time. You'll get there in a minute. But you are helping both parties not to get their backs up.

3. Cooperate Creatively.

Work with your child to take seriously both

your and her concerns (desires), and to craft a solution to the conflict that is God-honoring and mutually acceptable. Although this can work in the heat of the moment, it is better to do this proactively during a calm time, particularly if there are typical situations that set off your child's anger.

Here is an example of what "creative cooperation" looks like in practice.⁴ Let's say a typical flash point for a mother and son occurs about thirty minutes before dinner when he complains of hunger and asks for a snack. She doesn't permit a snack that close to dinner, because she is (rightly) afraid he will spoil his appetite. Creative cooperation begins with both parent and child understanding one another's perspective, desires, and concerns (Phil. 2:4). The mother needs to be prepared to conduct this conversation in a constructive way. The son's concern is that he feels hunger pangs and wants to eat something. Mom's concern is that he will spoil his appetite for the good meal now in the making. Notice that neither of these desires is sinful. The next step is to work together to craft a solution that addresses *both* sets of concerns. This is critical because the mother's typical solution ("You may not eat anything now") and the son's typical solution ("I want something to eat now") are completely at odds. What does a conversation sound like when it moves toward creative cooperation?

Mother (early in the day): "I've noticed that thirty minutes or so before dinner you usually want something to eat. What's up with that?"

Child: "I'm getting really hungry by then."

Mother: "So, because you're hungry, it's hard for you to wait the additional time to dinner?" (*This is an acknowledgement of your child's concern.*)

Child: "Yes."

Mother: "I'm concerned that if you eat something only thirty minutes before dinner, you won't have room for a good meal. How do you think we could work together to solve this problem in a way that lets you take the edge off hunger, saves your appetite for dinner, and honors God?" (*This is critical moment—here you are encouraging your child to be part of a mutual solution,*

rather than simply imposing a solution on them. This cooperative process is really designed to help your child grow in wisdom!)

Child: “I don’t know. Maybe if I just had a small handful of peanuts or something, instead of something bigger, I wouldn’t spoil my appetite.”

Mother: “Okay, that sounds reasonable. Let’s see how that works out over the next week.”

There are many other mutually acceptable ways to meld two concerns into one mutually satisfactory solution that will avoid a typical battle. For example, the child could eat a snack as soon as he gets home from school. Or, dinner could be moved earlier. Or, the child could eat a more substantial lunch. In addition, solving a ‘simple’ situation like this can give both parties hope in tackling more complex conflicts in a godly, constructive way that doesn’t degenerate into a raw battle of wills.

Of course, this is an easy case. Many other times it won’t be that simple. Parents will also have to proactively address the underlying heart issues that motivate defiance and anger. Sometimes the mother may need to examine what motivates the rigidity of her demand and overreaction. In the case just described, perhaps she has resisted any afternoon snack because “that’s not what we do” (her own mother made it an absolute, unquestioned rule). Or perhaps she takes her son’s simple request as a threat to her identity as a good cook. Her own fears magnify the situation out of proportion, and his anger is in part a reaction to the extremity of her fears. The family never talks about these more profound dramas that play out in a tiff on a Thursday afternoon. People just react, without knowing why, and asking careful, grace-oriented questions of oneself and others can often bring liberating surprises to the surface. In any case, the son must learn to acknowledge that his tantrum is wrong, and to ask forgiveness. Even when he is hungry (a bodily ‘weakness’), that does not give him license to fly into a rage. There is one other fruit of experiencing an instance of creative cooperation. Working toward a mutually satisfying, God-honoring solution will go a long way to preventing future outbursts, and it gives them familiar tools to tackle other problems.

Conclusion

Parenting a child who struggles with habitual anger is hard work. But parents (like children, like those who seek to counsel them) have this encouragement from the Lord: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). A wise counselor will help disheartened parents to hold onto that promise and to lean hard on Jesus, even as they continue to learn how to minister more and more wisely to the angry child in their life.

¹ These ideas will also prove helpful to others who relate to angry children: relatives, teachers, child-care workers, counselors. Throughout we will refer to ‘parents’, but we use the term inclusively. This article applies to single parent families and to families where one parent abdicates and leaves the burden on the other, as well as to families with both parents involved.

² Ross Green and J. Stuart Ablon, *Treating Explosive Kids: The Collaborative Problem-Solving Approach* (New York: Guilford, 2005), 18.

³ Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, *Good and Angry: Exchanging Frustration for Character ...in You and Your Kids!* (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Publications, 2002), 67-69.

⁴ Green and Ablon, 42-88.