

Raising Non-Violent Children

By Bonnie Harris

Ever fear your child turning violent? Consistent sibling slugs, pushing on the playground, provoking a pet, throwing things, threatening to “kill” someone, easily provokes us to catastrophize and project our child into juvenile delinquency

We do it in a nano-second. We try to stop the hitting, yelling, and angry outbursts with threats, punishment, and our own angry outbursts in an attempt to raise kind, peaceful children. We set the stage for just the opposite.

Anger is a natural human feeling. Instead of fearing it and trying to repress it in our children, we need to give anger and aggression an outlet. When we learn as children that we *shouldn't* feel a certain way, we believe we are bad when those natural feelings arise. We learn this from parents who had their feelings squashed. Few of us learned how to express our anger appropriately, so we fear it in our children.

Strict censorship of negative emotions may suppress feelings in some children yet cause problems in the long term. Many become depressed, can't stand up for themselves, freeze at challenges, cannot make decisions, etc. Medications and addictions often result.

Other children are less able to suppress angry energy due to more emotional, aggressive inborn temperaments. Continual negative feedback with punishment, threats, and disapproval, can turn children into bullies outside the home, power hungry adults in the workplace, and dictatorial, angry parents. Some progress to violent behavior. When natural energies are thwarted by threats, punishment, withdrawal of love, or isolation, those energies fester and retaliation becomes the logical option.

To raise peaceful, non-violent children, we need to empower them, parenting in a way that may feel counterintuitive. Aggressive energy does not turn violent when given proper outlets and support. Parents usually fear that indulging negative feelings gives permission for negative behavior. Just the opposite is true.

Tips To Diffuse Anger:

- Parent the child you have, not the child you want. Allow natural aggression. Channel it into appropriate behavior.
- Allow all feelings. Don't say, “It's not nice to say things like that about your friends/brother.” Or, “We don't say hate in this house.”
- Acknowledge that everyone gets angry and frustrated.
- Provide outlets for anger:
 - Squish a clay ball representing the angry target
 - Draw feelings with colorful markers
 - Punch a pillow representing the person
 - Bang on a piano
 - Punch a punching bag
 - Jump on a bed or trampoline

- Role play with child. Take turns being the child and target of anger. Allow anything to be said.

If your child is mad at you:

- Don't take it personally. It's temporary. It's about your child, not you.
- Don't react.
- Acknowledge. "Wow, you're really mad at me. I hear you."
- Hold a pillow in front of you and allow child to punch it.
- Offer similar vents to above
- Walk away, do nothing, and wait until later when you are both calm.

You are the facilitator of the energy outlet. You are in control. Your child can safely release her feelings and gain empowerment in the release so the feelings needn't do harm.

Only after feelings are purged, discuss what the child would like to do or say for real. Don't direct; give her the authority to decide for herself. In this safe space after feelings have been expressed and accepted, she knows what is right and wrong. Trust the process. In some cases, this process needs to be repeated several times. When you stay calm, she can yell what she wants. Then she will calm, be better able to say what she meant, or spontaneously apologize and make amends.

Bear witness to your child's feelings, be a sounding board, and your child will feel accepted and okay about himself. From this place there is no need for negative or violent behavior. Only when feelings are not allowed does the child feel wrong and unacceptable. Uncooperative, resistant behavior is an attempt to gain power. Allow the feelings and you empower your child.

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