

Regulating from the Inside Out

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When a baby cries, he is expressing his needs. He may become angry because he does not know if and when his needs will be met. When he has a loving mother, she responds to his cries and helps him to calm down as she soothes him. Over time, the baby learns to manage his emotions. He learns that he will feel better once his need is met or he feels safe. He is learning to control his anger.

Children who live in situations where their needs are not met may not learn to control their anger. As a result, their anger can be intense, scary, and even dangerous.

What Is Happening Inside the Body?

Anger causes physical symptoms. It causes our heart rates to increase and our skin to feel warm. Our muscles become tense, and we may feel nervousness in our stomachs. These are signals to calm down.

The first step in helping children to regulate their anger is helping them to understand these physical symptoms. Try these activities:

When the children are calm, ask them to feel their hearts beating. Ask if the beats are slow or fast. Next, run around or dance and have the children check their heartbeats again. Talk about how the beats are now faster. Tell them that anger may cause their heart rates to go from slow to fast. When that happens, they should take slow, deep breaths.

Have the children practice relaxing and tensing their muscles by clenching their fists or shrugging their shoulders. Talk about how their bodies may become tense when they are angry. When that happens, they should try to relax their muscles.

What Is Happening Inside the Brain?

When we are angry, we either think something that makes us calm down or we think something that makes us stay angry. To teach children to think helpful thoughts, try the following:

Read books or tell stories that teach them how to solve problems when they are angry or overwhelmed.

Teach them something positive to say when they realize they are angry. For example, if a child starts to feel angry, he can say, "I can calm down" and take deep breaths. This will help him to relax.

Help them to identify what is making them angry. Encourage them to share their feelings. Ask them to think about what made them angry and why. This will help them feel more in control of their anger.

By helping children to practice these skills, caring adults can guide them as they learn to self-regulate from the inside out.