

## Adam – a case study example of anger management

Adam is 6 years of age; I worked with Adam on a personal behaviour plan to help him with his temper and anger behaviour.

He was going through some major issues at home related to family breakdown. He had been displaying significant temper and anger by ignoring his teacher and kicking at furniture, kicking at classroom walls and walking or running away when he was very angry.

We set aside some time (from classroom time) to talk about anger, angry feelings and what we do to make things better when we feel really upset (not sad upset, but *really* annoyed upset) and angry.

1. We talked about the sorts of things that he get angry about/with at school (as well as his feelings about home ...) the school counsellor was working with him on home-related issues of concern:
  - When people won't let me play with them
  - When they say I'm no good at football, I can't kick properly
  - When they say things like ... (we talked about some mean, nasty, hurtful things that some children were saying to him)
  - We talked about why he thought some people were like this. "Sometimes I think they hate me? I don't know; sometimes I think that."

"They don't care how people feel sometimes ... they think it's funny (when they say mean things) and I don't think it is!" He was quite perceptive when he said, "They are trying to have power over me, trying to control me?" This was something he had already explored with his teacher.

He smiled at the next issue we discussed, "I even, sometimes, get angry with myself when I try to do something and I can't ...".

We spoke here about the *normality* of frustration (it is not as 'strong' as ANGER) and how he had got better at other things (like his swimming and his reading) through *time and practising*. Later we used the ideas of *practising* skills of anger management to reduce frustration and learn to feel better when we have to deal with frustrations and our anger (see, later, p. 163).

2. We then talked about what happens *in* our bodies when we get angry; what anger 'looks like', 'feels like', 'sounds like'. He spoke about his arms going out and having tight fists, of having hands on his hips and his eyes going 'squishy' (frown) and how he has a 'turning around feeling' in his tummy *and* his head. He then said, "Sometimes I shout and yell ... I *sometimes* (sic) push ... hit and kick *sometimes* ... (that's when I have to go to cool off time ...)". He said that his anger was a 'hot feeling' "like a volcano about to blow ..." (sic).

We drew a picture of a volcano (with colours). I discussed with him that "a volcano can't help it ... it is what volcanoes do ... how they go ... *we* are not a volcano (though the feeling might be 'like' ...). *We* can slow down; *we* don't *have* to 'burst up and out ...' like a volcano."



We came up with several strategies together based on an understanding of:

- (i) knowing *what* sorts of things (and situations) I get angry about.
- (ii) I don't have to **stay** angry; there are things I can do to feel better and make things better **when** that strong feeling comes.

We had talked about the things he had already tried to do to help himself. His teacher had told him to try to ‘shut it out’ by closing his eyes. I asked him if that helped “... Maybe a little bit.” “My teacher also tells me to go to *cool-off time*. Sometimes when I am angry if I have kicked the wall or push chairs ...”, “I don’t always kick chairs ...”, “Miss \_\_\_\_\_ says, I can put my head on my arms, and rest on my desk for a little while ...”.

- (iii) Most of all – having a plan. When I feel *quite angry*, or *very angry* I know what to do *so I don’t make things worse and the things I can do to feel better*. (see below). (See also, Appendix F).

We had discussed that:

- we can’t help the *feeling of anger* when it comes. This is a crucial understanding (as noted earlier). Anger is sometimes telling us that something is not right like when others are (sometimes) nasty to us, or saying things about us that are not true ...

Yes, the feeling of anger is unpleasant, it’s not a nice feeling. *The feeling though cannot tell us what to do when we’re angry*.

- I know things happen in my body when I get angry: faster breathing, my heart goes faster; my face gets ‘a bit screwed up’ (I frown, between my eyes ...); I get tense shoulders and even a tense face. We had discussed what *tense* and *tensing* meant.

I had modelled these physiological aspects of behaviour for Adam as part of the behaviour recovery support meetings.

## Adam’s plan

We then wrote up our plan with some drawings (see Appendix F).

When I feel angry I can:

- Close my eyes and count *backwards* from 10 (10, 9 ...). If I’m a bit embarrassed and I think people are looking I can still count quietly inside my head ...
- *Calm breathing* ... I count 1, 2 (slowly) as I breathe in (I count in my head). I hold my breath in for 1, 2 seconds and slowly breathe out for 1, 2 seconds. “It’s like I’m blowing the anger out ...”. I agreed with him. We talked about a full balloon and letting the air out “like blowing my anger out ...”.
- “When I’ve finished my counting and three calm breaths, I can *untense my face and shoulders*.” We distinguished between *deep* breaths and *calm* breaths.
- and, then, “another couple of calm breaths.” Even a drink of water helps.
- “I know, too, my teacher does care about me. I know I can always tell her how I feel when the anger comes down and she has got some time for us to talk ...”, “My teacher can help me to talk to the people who upset me. She can help me sort it out and make it better.”
- “It’s OK to rest sometimes and to cry as well when I get angry.”

The key – overriding – theme in Adam’s plan was the self-belief that “I can learn to control me too. This is my plan. I am learning to do things that can help me make things better (not worse) *when* I have angry feelings.” That belief was supported by his teacher’s modelling, encouragement and assurance.

It was so encouraging when one of my 5-year-old children went from an initial (and frequent) “I’m going to burn this f—ing school down”, to finding his school an enjoyable and *safe* haven. It was the daily experience of how we do things at school, how we can learn to deal with frustration in work and relationships that enabled his experience that life doesn’t have to be angrily reactive every day. (Elizabeth)

There is a very helpful book to teach relaxation skills to children in groups, and individually. See the text by Jenny Rickard, *Relaxation for Children* (1994).