

ANGER.*

Anger is an emotion which practically every individual experiences from time to time. It is an intense emotion and one which often leads to undesirable conduct. This is particularly true in children who, because of their limited training and experience, have not developed adequate self-control, and are therefore apt to show a vicious attitude toward the object which has aroused their anger.

Anger is frequently stimulated when any of the instinctive tendencies are thwarted or obstructed. How often the child is seen to turn in wrath on the blocks that will not stay one on another or the train of cars that will not go. He strives to break and destroy them because he cannot construct or operate them as he wishes. Again the child, and the adult too, is seen to show anger when personal wants are obstructed or pride and self-importance are injured. Fear, with no outlet for flight or escape, may arouse anger, as in the animal at bay. It is produced, therefore, by innumerable causes that may operate in the environment in which the individual is living, and it may express itself in many different ways.

In dealing with this emotion in children it is necessary not only to be sure that a certain act was an expression of anger but to determine, so far as possible, how the anger was aroused. For example, a solution is sought for the problem of a child who for two weeks has been breaking window glass. Among other things investigation may show that he was always angry when he broke the glass. The next step of importance is to find out the circumstances and conditions of the environment which produced this emotion of anger. In this particular case it so happens that it was the result of jealousy, but it might well have been stimulated by many other feelings, such as resentment at receiving punishment which the child felt was undeserved, or failure in school or at games.

The reason for the anger is particularly important in dealing with the problems of children when anger colours the picture. The vital thing is not the anger; this is only a danger signal which warns us to look deeper for the fundamental cause from which it arises.

The emotion of anger is dependent for control upon the development of certain inhibitions or restraints, and if the child is to grow into a self-controlled and useful adult it is essential that they be established early in life. The important thing for him to learn is that the natural tendency to react to this emotion by retaliation does not at all times work out to his advantage.

One of the common manifestations of anger in children is the so-called temper tantrum, an uncontrolled outburst of kicking and screaming, which is a dramatic physical demonstration of the child's resentment. On the other hand, some children when angered become sullen and moody. Of the two attitudes the latter may result in more harm to the child. It frequently leads to brooding, and unhealthy fantasy formation of a revengeful nature, which gradually may cause the child's interests to "turn in" and his energy to be wasted in living a "dream life" of things as he would have them, and not as they really are. A temper tantrum, however, may result in undesirable conduct for the moment, and

then the atmosphere may be cleared until the next occasion for anger arises. In a great majority of children the emotion shown is not out of proportion to the stimulation, is of short duration, and is a normal healthy reaction. In fact, it might be said that there is something wrong with the child who never becomes angry. However, the child who meets all difficult situations in life with chronic irritability or a temper tantrum is in grave danger of developing other personality defects later which will make him an unhappy, inadequate individual in adult life.

Almost invariably one learns that the temper tantrums manifested by children work out, either directly or indirectly, to their advantage, for the moment at least. It may be that the child is determined to have his own way or craves attention, no matter how it is gained, or feels that he can obtain a bribe if he holds out long enough. The demonstration the youngster makes of his anger is so spectacular and impressive to those who have denied him his desires that they surrender and agree to his demands in order to avoid further unpleasant scenes. It is quite amazing to see the acuteness with which a child can choose the time and place where giving in to him will seem almost a necessity. In this way the child quickly learns that he can partly control his surroundings. Soon the tantrums which originally were produced by situations calling for intense emotion are produced to dodge any situation requiring submission to the will of others. The temper has become out of all proportion to the demands of the occasion, and the child will as readily stage a violent tantrum if the mother has brought him a red lollipop when he desired a green one as he would if the tantrum were the result of some real grievance.

The child who has these explosions of temper is likely to be emotionally unstable by nature, the type of child who is not capable of withstanding the average amount of stress and strain without undue fatigue. Temper tantrums are only one of the many symptoms of nervous fatigue in childhood. They are often preceded by restless sleep, capricious habits regarding food, faultfinding and complaints of being "picked upon" by playmates and unjustly treated by parents and teachers. This means that the child needs more rest and sleep as well as more energetic play during his waking hours.

Temper tantrums in each instance must be considered in relation to the exciting cause and the personality of the child. If they represent an unconscious protest against the thwarting of some fundamental desire, every effort should be made to determine the cause and remove it or alter the child's attitude towards it. On the other hand, if they have become habitual—that is, a crude method of gaining an end—or if they are utilised to attract attention or obtain bribes then it must be definitely decided that they will no longer work out to the child's advantage. Once a definite stand is adopted it will not take the child long to see that his former methods of gaining his ends are no longer tolerated, that he is making no material gain and is losing approbation by his conduct. When once he senses this the temper tantrums will be discarded.

Anger is not always expressed by such explosive reactions. There is a group of cases in which the individual is so overcome by anger that temporarily action

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[previous page](#)

[next page](#)