



**CALMING
ANGRY
KIDS**

help and hope for parents in the whirlwind

tricia goyer

A large, stylized graphic of a whirlwind or tornado, composed of concentric, swirling lines that taper towards the bottom. The text is centered within the upper part of the swirl.

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Part 1

UNDERSTANDING ANGER: THEIRS AND YOURS

TRAUMA AND THE TRUTH BEHIND MAD

Aly, the first of our adopted children, joined our family as a newborn, and the sibling closest to her age was sixteen years old. So when we told her that we were going to adopt two children who were near her age, three-year-old Aly was excited. Yet we soon realized that we had to stay near and keep a close eye as the three of them played together. Both two-year-old Buddy and five-year-old Sissy were easily upset.

Not too many days after Sissy and Buddy moved in, the three children were playing in their bedroom as I folded laundry just outside the bedroom door. John stood in the hall next to me.

“That’s mine!” we heard Aly’s small voice cry out.

“No, mine!” Sissy responded.

John quickly stepped into the room and paused. I heard shock in his voice. “Did you just hit your sister?”

The cry that followed pierced the air. It wasn’t Aly, the child who’d been hit. (The hit wasn’t hard enough for that.) Instead, it was

Sissy. She screamed and threw herself on the floor with a rage we'd never seen in a child before.

I hurried into the bedroom, unsure what had happened. John knelt beside her and attempted to calm her with his words. Her face flamed red, and pure anger flashed in her eyes. She kicked and swung her arms as the two toddlers hurried away from her.

To protect her and the other children, John scooped up Sissy. He cradled her like a baby, but that just angered her more. He sat on the bed and held her tight. "That's okay. It's going to be all right. You're going to be all right."

After that first tantrum, Sissy experienced tantrums on a daily basis. She kicked, screamed, and hit, and she was strong. When John was home, he held her, attempting to protect her and the other kids. When he wasn't home, it was up to me.

In her angry state, Sissy posed a danger to herself and others. Yet when I held her, it seemed to fuel her fury. With all my strength, I'd cradle her in front of me, cuddled up like a mother holding her infant. This allowed me to hold her fists and control her legs—dangling to the side—so she couldn't kick me (which she continually tried to do). In this hold, her face tensed and reddened as she squeezed her eyes shut. Sometimes she screamed mean words and threats. Since she couldn't hurt me with her body, she tried to do it with her words. The last thing she wanted was to make eye contact with me.

But when I looked into my daughter's angry eyes, all I saw was a broken little girl.

"It's okay, Sissy. Everything's going to be okay. I love you. God loves you," I'd speak into her screams. Then I'd pray over her. As

her screams quieted, I'd sing Sunday school songs from my childhood. While these things didn't always calm Sissy, they helped calm me.

At first, during these episodes, Sissy jerked and twisted her head, trying to look away. When she did return my gaze, she glared at me with daggers in her eyes. Eventually—after weeks of my holding and cradling her—she started to make eye contact. Even though she struggled and fought, physically demanding I let her go, her eyes said something different. They seemed to plead, *Hold on. Keep clinging to me. Keep fighting for me. Don't let go.*

When John and I first considered adopting kids from foster care, we worried about all the paperwork and home visits that go along with adoption. We were concerned about the expenses, where we'd fit more kids into our lives, and how to prepare our other children for their new siblings. I fretted about new personalities and adding more work to my busy life. I had no idea what would really consume our days: dealing with my children's anger. Buddy made huge messes and destroyed things. Sissy's anger proved all-consuming. By the time they moved in with us, these two young children had stayed in twelve different homes. With a broken heart, I remember one of the first things Sissy ever told me: "I don't like waking up in a new place."

The Truth behind Mad

Can you imagine being a tiny, frail five-year-old shuffled from home to home and expected to trust adults you don't know? Sissy had no place to call her own. She had no control. She had no voice ...

except one she used to scream and shout really, really loudly. Anger provided her a way to communicate that things were not right in her world and in her heart.

These kids were strangers to me, just as I was to them. We had no bond. I had not held them as little babies and hugged and kissed them. And even during peaceful moments, they didn't let me get too close or offer much affection.

I wish I could say I was always calm and loving when dealing with my daughter's angry episodes. That's not the case. *I* was angry. I was mad not just because of her actions but also because I couldn't get any work done. Nor could I care for the other kids. While I dealt with Sissy, Buddy and Aly were often fighting each other or getting into stuff. There is no more helpless feeling than holding a raging five-year-old while two toddlers dump boxes of cereal and crackers in the pantry.

But anger wasn't my only negative emotion. I also felt guilt for how adding these two kids was affecting the rest of our family, particularly our teenage son and my grandmother, who lived with us. The peace that once reigned in our home was gone ... as was the peace within my own heart.

The truth behind mad is that no one likes it, especially the angry child.

It's not as if Sissy was happy with or thrived on being angry. She seemed to hate it as much as we did. She just didn't know how to handle things differently. She didn't know how to communicate her pain or other emotions. She didn't know how to protect her heart from being hurt again—from being abandoned again—except to act out.

Later, when Sissy and Buddy went to therapy, I learned about the walls they'd erected around their hearts. It was less risky for them to act out than to lower their guard only to be hurt again. It was more empowering for them to be mad than to be sad. It was especially easier to be mad than to be vulnerable and feel powerless. It's amazing how kids push us away, when they really want us to hold them close.

Fight, Flight, or Freeze

Many people think painful things just bounce off kids. They believe children get over such things quickly, but I disagree. Consider your own childhood. What affected you as a child—a loss, a divorce, bullying, neglect? Do you recall angry words that were targeted at you? Has it been easy to get over such things? Have you seen how those painful times affected the rest of your life in big and small ways?

Angry kids do not “just get over” the anger that often accompanies childhood hurts. It will pop up in unexpected ways and in unexpected places, which is why it's vital for us to help our kids now, while they are still young. Anger comes out in small ways when they are little, and it comes out in bigger ways as they grow.

Help is available for angry kids, but first it's important to figure out the underlying causes of our children's anger so we find ways to help calm and heal them. In our family's case, the most obvious cause of our kids' anger was the trauma they had experienced—the neglect in their early childhood and the confusion and pain of being in state care and moved around a lot.

Trauma-triggered anger usually manifests itself in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze. But this doesn't apply just to kids who've faced trauma. All children exhibit the same type of responses; actually, we are all wired to protect ourselves. When we sense danger, we will instinctively react with a fight, flight, or freeze response. Not a lot of thought goes into this response. The body just naturally does its thing.

Fight is exhibiting anger in response to pain or danger. It can look like kicking, screaming, gasping for breath, clenching fists, or throwing objects.

Flight is attempting to run away from anything that is causing pain, anger, or other overwhelming emotions. It might include darting eyes, fidgeting, jumping up on a table, or actually running away, often without concern for safety.

Freeze is harder to understand but may involve shutting down, holding one's breath, feeling unable to move, or escaping into one's own mind. When kids "freeze," they are physically present with us but are someplace else mentally. They shut down.

Children respond with fight, flight, or freeze when they feel threatened (even if the danger is only perceived and not an actual danger). Often we parents don't understand what is happening. But what we view as a small problem or unexpected disruption our kids may see as a huge threat. That's because their reaction is not always a response to something happening in that moment. A child's response—including extreme anger—is often tied to something that occurred in her past. Something happening in the present triggered the memory (often unconscious) of what occurred previously.

As a means of protection, a child's subconscious perceives the threat from the past as something threatening her in the present.

For example, a child may feel threatened when seeing a playground swing after she had a bad fall or when recognizing anger on an adult's face, because in the past adult anger led to abuse. Just about anything can seem threatening to a child if trauma is attached to it.

I didn't realize this for many years. I'd express frustration over a messy living room and my child would respond by arguing and fighting with me. Asking her to pick up her socks would lead to a large blowup. Why? The frustrated look in my eyes triggered her "fight" response. Because in her past, situations had escalated quickly—from frustration, to anger, and sometimes to violence—her body learned to prepare for the fight to come.

Things related to the senses—a touch, sound, word or phrase, taste, or smell—also sometimes trigger fight, flight, or freeze responses. Your child may appear to be overreacting, but the reaction actually points to something deeper, something not always connected with past trauma. Even how kids perceive a nonthreatening situation can trigger a fight, flight, or freeze response.

I saw this phenomenon recently with my seven-year-old daughter, Aly. I told her that she was going to stay the night at her friend Brianna's house, expecting her to get excited. Instead, Aly got angry and said she didn't want to go. Her anger rose, and then she melted into tears.

Knowing something was going on, I asked Aly what she was thinking about. She confessed that the last time she visited Brianna, we informed her we were going to pick her up before dinner. But we hadn't realized how early Brianna's family ate dinner. When they sat down to eat before we came, Aly grew worried and scared. She said she waited by the window for an hour and refused to eat. Not

realizing this, John and I had arrived at the time we had planned. We hadn't meant to lie to our daughter or worry her (we had said what we believed would be true). But Aly felt a mix of strong emotions when we didn't show up when she expected—fear, worry, and anger. So when I told Aly she could stay with Brianna again, these same feelings were triggered in her.

Aly's story illustrates what an anger trigger can look like, but in some cases the emotions displayed can be far more intense. Kids with a traumatic background often have this (posttraumatic stress disorder). Some of our children have PTSD, and it helped when their therapist explained that PTSD is more than just a stirring up of memories of past trauma; instead, the sufferer's emotions and body's reaction make her feel as if she's actually reliving that moment. A current trigger can take the child back to all the pain, fear, and anger, causing her body to react as it did the first time, even if she is no longer in that dangerous situation.

For example, I might raise my voice when I discover my child sneaking food, and immediately my child's heart begins to race, her thoughts fill with fear, and her body shuts down. She may not consciously be thinking of all the times when she cried because she was hungry or when she frantically searched the kitchen for food, but her mind and body remember and relive those moments, stirring up immediate anger and a fight for that food.

Sometimes these PTSD episodes include flashbacks, but not always. Emotions that emerge may include fear, worry, sadness, anger, or feelings of being alone and unworthy. Behaviors might involve aggression, and children may even act out parts of the trauma in their daily lives.¹

When we first adopted our kids, I didn't always understand that their extreme fight, flight, or freeze responses were often related to past trauma. Some responses were obviously related; others less so. During one episode, one of my teen daughters saw a large bug on the floor, and she jumped up on the dining table, screaming and crying so dramatically I was certain she had to be acting. She wasn't. Shocked by her response, I asked her what was wrong, and she screamed at me for not helping her. She seethed, as if I'd put the bug there. I could tell her reaction embarrassed her, but this emotion too came out as anger.

Only after I took care of the bug and allowed my daughter time to calm down could I approach her and help her. It turns out, seeing that bug reminded her of living in a bug-infested home. Seeing the same type of bug took our daughter back emotionally to living in squalid conditions and the terror she felt over not being able to escape the bugs. Yet it wasn't a conscious memory that caused the reaction. Her emotions—her fight-or-flight response—took place even before she realized how she was behaving.

Sometimes I could tell what triggered a fight, flight, or freeze response in my child, but other times not. This is often the case with trauma reminders. Even something as seemingly neutral as an aroma, the sound of a distant train whistle, or a song on the radio can take a child back to a hard place. Our daughter Sissy sometimes froze in the face of a perceived threat. She wouldn't speak and wouldn't respond. Instead, she stared off into space as if replaying a story in her mind. This lasted for a few minutes at a time. Usually I sat by Sissy's side until she returned to the present moment. The anger she exhibited next often surprised me. She'd get mad that I was concerned and that I had asked whether she was all right. Her anger came from not

wanting to face the feelings that surged through her. Remember, it can be easier to get mad than to deal with a strong emotion.

If any of this sounds familiar to you or if your child seems to overreact in certain situations, it's time to ask questions. Your child may need help dealing with some type of trauma—big or small. If you know of past trauma, seek professional help while your child is young. Ignoring these emotions and behaviors doesn't make them go away. Hopefully some of the tools in this book can provide guidance for how to calm your child and connect with her in ways that will bring healing.

But remember this: not every freak-out moment signifies a trauma trigger. Kids go from zero to ten, from calm to angry, for many reasons. Sometimes mad means sad. It can also mean anxious, afraid, overwhelmed, or any of a variety of emotions. Anger may help a child feel powerful for the moment, but afterward that child usually experiences regret and powerlessness. Anger may temporarily numb the pain, but it doesn't get rid of the hurt.

YOU Are Your Children's Answer

We'll talk about other causes of anger in the next two chapters, but for now let me say that you play a key role in helping your child. Sometimes children need professional help to shift from angry to calm, but they *always* need their parents' help. As difficult as it is to deal with angry kids, this is not a task to turn over to others. Seeking support, especially professional support, may be essential, but it doesn't replace what only you can provide. You are the only dad or mom your kids have. Your kids are reachable, but you have

to reach out. Your love, care, affection, and commitment to helping them provide their best chance to live productive and emotionally healthy lives, no matter their ages.

If I had to choose just one thing for you to do while reading this book, it would be to commit. To realize that with God's guidance you can be the help—or find the help—your child needs. Whether you've had your child since birth—or your child is new to your home—you are the expert with your kid. No one is as invested as you are. No one else will deal with the long-range ramifications of your children's emotional health in the same way.

Let your kids know you're on their team when it comes to handling these anger issues. It's not you against your kids; it's you *with your kids* against angry tendencies.

Reflection Questions

1. What truths have you discovered from this chapter about what's really behind “mad”?
2. What response is most common in your kids: fight, flight, or freeze?
3. Why is it easier for your kids—and for you—to be mad than vulnerable?

Action Steps

1. Make a list of things that seem to trigger your child's anger. Add to this list as you go through the week. What do you notice?

2. The next time your child is fighting with you or trying to push you away, pause and consider whether it's really a cry for you to hold on or draw near. Make a plan for how to respond in the future, knowing your child really wants you to draw near to her.
3. Take note of the next time your child has an outburst that seems too dramatic for the situation. Later, after your child is calm, create a safe space for her to talk and ask her, "What were you thinking about when you got mad? Is there another event that came to mind, making you mad or upset? Tell me about that."