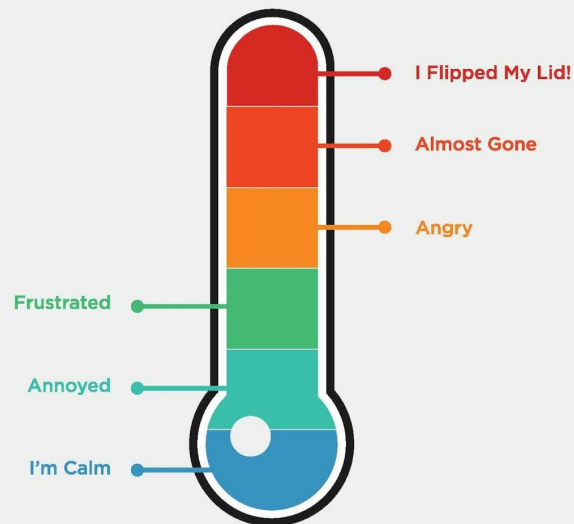


# Parent Guide to The Anger Thermometer & The Anger Rules

*By Tony L. Sheppard, Psy.D., CGP, FAGPA*

## THE ANGER THERMOMETER



# The Anger Thermometer

*“Do Not Teach Your Children Never to be Angry; teach Them How to Be Angry”*

-Lyman Abbott

## **Introduction**

Children learn to manage emotion through observation and coaching. Most children require help from adults and peers in order to learn to control their emotions. Anger is a natural human emotion. Everyone is born with the ability to get mad. As children get older, they are capable of making choices about how they deal with their anger and frustration.

It is important that we all learn to manage our anger responsibly. If we can do that, anger can be our friend. Controlled anger and frustration can get things done! Complete avoidance of angry feelings is neither healthy or helpful. It is important that we all learn as much as we can about our own experience of anger. This allows us to be very aware of what gets us angry, when we're feeling anger, and how we respond to these feelings.

Knowledge of what your anger feels like, looks like, and how it is triggered is necessary to develop a healthy emotional life. Sure, you can steer yourself or your child away from situations that you know will lead to anger or frustration. But, there will be times when you have little or no control over when your anger rises up! Research shows that people who are the healthiest (both physically and psychologically) are those who learn about their own emotions and manage them appropriately. Denying our anger only leads to suppressed or “stuffed” anger that causes stress and other problems. Instead, we take the view that anger is emotional energy that needs to be understood and managed appropriately, safely, and constructively.

## **How to Use this Booklet**

This booklet is written for parents and is intended for use as a guide to working with your child or teen as they learn about emotions and how to manage them. Obviously, adults might benefit from practicing these strategies as well. We recommend practicing the skills along with your child or teen. In fact, this is usually most effective when everyone in the family works together on it. We encourage you to print copies of **The Anger Thermometer** and **The Anger Rules** to hang up at home. These are available on the Groupworks website: [www.drtsheppard.com](http://www.drtsheppard.com)!

There are activities throughout this booklet that allow you and your child or teen to identify the signs of your anger more specifically and to note coping strategies. Particularly with children, it can be very helpful to complete these together!

## How We Handle Anger

Most psychologists agree that anger is a protective emotion. In other words, we feel anger when we are threatened in some way and this leads us into action so that we don't get hurt. A threat can be real or imagined. We can feel that our lives or safety are being threatened, but we can also feel threat toward our property, our rights, or someone or something dear to us.

We respond to our anger and other emotions in a number of different ways. Although the exact responses vary a lot, our actions can usually be categorized in one of three ways. Our actions usually take the form of **fight, flight or freeze**. Many times when we feel threatened and we respond with a **fight**, we lash out at someone or something. This involves becoming verbally or physically aggressive. Imagine that someone feels their freedom is threatened and they make a verbal threat. A teenager who is being grounded throws their mobile phone across the room. A child who is placed in time out tells her mother she's going to kick her. Some of us are more prone to "fight" than others.

A **flight** response involves someone feeling threatened and responding with running away from the threat. This involves physically or emotionally avoiding and/or getting away from whatever is threatening us. Imagine someone discovers that a friend has violated their trust and they avoid the person. A teenager who is being confronted for lying by his parents runs out of the house. A child becomes angry at a peer who takes his lunchbox and refuses to re-enter the classroom.

A **freeze** response occurs when we do just that. We respond with utter inaction. This is typically when we are so overwhelmed by our emotions that we simply cannot act. Imagine that someone is so overwhelmed by the actions of another person that they practically get stuck. This is often referred to as the "deer in the headlights" phenomenon. A parent whose teen has thrown her mobile phone at the wall and broken it, is simply overcome and unable to respond. A child whose peer has broken a toy, is so overwhelmed that they simply shut down.

*We can respond to any emotion in any of these three broad ways. Take a minute to help your child rank these as to how often they have each response.*

Most of the time I \_\_\_\_\_ when I'm angry or frustrated.

Some of the time I \_\_\_\_\_ when I'm angry or frustrated.

Every now and then I \_\_\_\_\_ when I'm angry or frustrated.

## Anger & The Brain

Of all of the emotions we feel, anger can be a particularly difficult one for people to manage. Perhaps this is because it can come on so quickly and can be so destructive when it does come. In order to help people learn to control their anger, it is very important to understand how emotions work in our brains. Much of the information presented about emotions in this booklet is based on *Interpersonal Neurobiology* and the work of Dr. Daniel Siegel at UCLA. Dr. Dan says that our brains are shaped by the interactions that we have with other people from a very early age. This means that parents play a significant role in the ways we learn to deal with feelings.

We've learned some very important things about how the emotion system in our brain functions. First of all, our emotions originate from a part of the brain called the *limbic system*. This a collection of small structures located very deep in the brain underneath the *cerebral cortex*, which is the part we often see in pictures of the brain (imagine a lump of big broad noodles).

An important point to recognize is that there are levels or degrees to our emotions. Everyone can relate to being mildly annoyed by someone or a situation. Most people can also relate to being frustrated, mad, angry, and even being extremely angry. In situations that stimulate our emotions, they tend to escalate unless we take action to stop them. Once something comes along to trigger our anger, it usually grows unless 1) the situation goes away or 2) we do something to change or get out of the situation. As we get to the higher levels of anger, most people lose control of their actions and words.

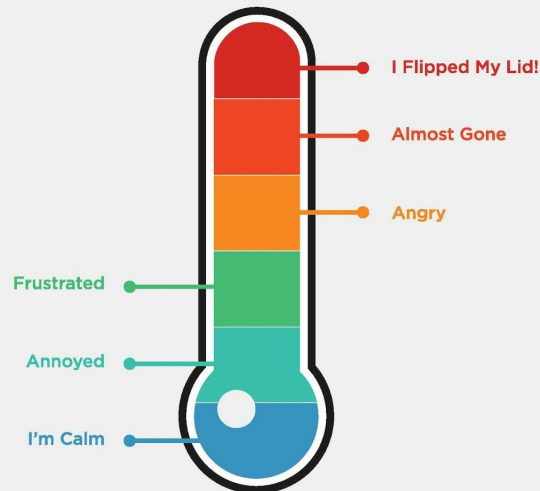
Our brains have a natural system of regulation over the limbic or emotional system! The **frontal lobe** of the brain, which is slightly above our eyes and right behind the forehead, acts as the brakes for our emotions. The frontal lobe of our brain helps us take into account our situation, others around us, etc. It is the part of our brain that says, "Hey, take it easy, you can handle this!". As our emotions rise up, the brakes (or frontal lobes) of our brains don't work as well. This is where our coping skills come into play!

### Summary

So, we have these two general ideas: **1) there are levels of emotion that increase in intensity and 2) our brains are naturally wired to go up the levels of intensity and to come back down the levels of intensity**. Seems simple, right? It can be. Sometimes we over-complicate things for ourselves and our kids when we try to help them get a handle on anger. The idea of an anger thermometer is a helpful one to kids (and grown ups) in remembering how anger and other emotions work in our brains. It gives us a common language to use when we talk about the levels of our anger. It also helps us to remember that anger tends to increase if we don't take action to lower its "temperature".

## Using The Anger Thermometer

### THE ANGER THERMOMETER



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So, let's talk about the anger thermometer in the way that we would use it with children and teens to teach them about their anger. The first thing you might notice about the Anger Thermometer is that the colors go from blue (calm) through green, orange and red (watch out). We'd start at the bottom: **I'm Calm**. At this level, most people would feel very calm with no anger, stress or frustration. Their bodies would be relaxed and their minds would probably be thinking of positive, happy thoughts. Things are good!

...Until someone comes along and stands too close to you in the lunch line...maybe they even bump you a little. Suddenly, your muscles tense a little...maybe you feel it in your stomach or your neck. You are now **Annoyed**. Let's say the person doesn't move. Maybe they bump you again. You're not sure if they're doing this on purpose or they're just a jerk. Your muscles get a little more tense...maybe your heartbeat gets faster, your arms tense up. You clear your throat loudly to get their attention. They don't even seem to notice you. You've just become **Frustrated!**

Stop and take a minute to list some of the ways you would know you've moved from Annoyed to Frustrated on the Anger Thermometer...(consider what you'd be thinking, feeling, and doing):

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

The person in the lunch line who is standing too close to you, says, "Excuse me?" and shoots you a dirty look. Oh boy! Your hands start shaking, your face turns red, you can hear your heart beating really fast now. Welcome to **Angry**. You grumble, "Would you mind standing a little farther away from me?". The person looks at you and says, "Why?" in a sort of sarcastic way...still standing very close to you! Your heart beats even faster, your legs get tense, your arms get tense.

OK, take another minute to list a few of the signs that would alert you that you've moved to Angry on the Anger Thermometer...(consider what you'd be thinking, feeling, and doing):

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

At this point, you might even start to think angry thoughts like, "I should shove you away" or "I can't stand this person". They still don't move out of your space. Now you're **Almost Gone**. You shout, "Well, you're standing too close, give me some space!". The person says, "Oh you mean like all that space in your head where you should have a brain?". You're breathing heavily, your face is very red, your brain hurts, you feel hot all over. You're eyes are bulging out of your head! There's a little voice inside your head saying, "Hit them, HIT THEM". You put your fists up... Suddenly, before you even know it, you're screaming loudly, "MOVE!!!!!!". It's like you're on auto-pilot. Smoke could be coming out your ears. You reach for a tray and slam it against the wall. You just Flipped Your Lid!!!!

Take a minute to talk about what it would look like to Flip Your Lid?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Why do we call **Flipping Your Lid**? Well, because that thinking part of your brain that looks like a big bowl of noodles just shut down. Your brain is being run by pure emotion! The lid on your brain, which keeps the emotional part under control has "flipped".


A very important point that we learn from the Anger Thermometer is that there is a danger zone that begins at **Angry**. If you let yourself get to **Angry** or **Almost Gone**, you will PROBABLY go all the way if you don't do something to calm yourself down.

## Cooling Down

So, we need to stop at **Frustrated** on the scale and begin moving back down to avoid a disaster. How do we do that? Well, there's no one-size-fits-all answer to that question. Thanks to the Kids Club groups at Groupworks, however, there are a lot of choices! Our groups have worked over the years to compile a list of ideas for moving down the Anger Thermometer:

### How to Move Down the Anger Thermometer By The Kids Club

1. Squish an anger ball
2. Punch a pillow
3. Ignore annoying behavior
4. Hold a stuffed animal
5. Tell an adult about your feelings
6. Close your eyes
7. Go to your room
8. Ask for attention from an adult
9. Have a place you can go to calm down
10. Exercise
11. Play a game
12. Lay on your bed
13. Go in the bathroom
14. Play a handheld video game
15. Close your eyes and imagine your calm place
16. Pray or meditate
17. Take a nap
18. Take a break and rest
19. Read a book
20. Play with legos
21. Breathe or Take 5 Deep Breaths
22. Think of Something Fun that's going to happen
23. Yell into a pillow
24. Think Before you Act
25. Think of something Funny
26. Use Humor
27. Go to a River or Lake
28. Go Outside
29. Do Something Fun
30. Run Laps
31. Ask Someone to stop Annoying Behavior
32. Stay away from the Person Who Upset You
33. Use Your Words
34. Run Around to "Get it Out"
35. Sit Down for a Minute
36. Count to 10
37. Ride Your Bike
38. Think About a Prize You'll Get from Staying Calm
39. Put Your Mind on Something Else
40. Walk Away from Someone who is Angry
41. Spend time with Your Pet (Dog, Cat, Bird, Fish, Etc.)
42. Look at a Lava Lamp
43. Watch TV
44. Help Another Person



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Work with your child or teen to review these suggestions and identify a few that you want to try or that work well for your child. Highlight these or write them on a separate sheet. This will help to simplify coping when you're in the heat of the moment. It's not recommended to read through a sheet of dozens of coping strategies when you're mad!

# The Anger Rules

Sometimes it's necessary to make decisions about how we are going to handle our anger or how we handled it (after the fact). There's actually a simple way to do this! **The Anger Rules** offer a very simple set of guidelines for checking ourselves. This idea is borrowed from a wonderful anger workbook titled *A Volcano In My Tummy* by Eliane Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney.

## THE ANGER RULES

### IT'S OK TO GET MAD, BUT:

**DON'T Hurt Others!**  
**DON'T Hurt Yourself!**  
**DON'T Hurt Property!**

### INSTEAD:

**DO Talk About It!**

**Remember, 'hurting' includes someone else's or your own feelings.**

Adapted from *A Volcano in my Tummy* by Eliane Whitehouse & Warwick Pudney

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The *Volcano In My Tummy* book teaches that there are two general categories of responses to anger: Clean & Dirty. **Clean Anger** obeys all of the anger rules. **Dirty Anger** violates one or more of the Anger Rules. This offers a very simple way to check yourself with how you've managed your anger.

For example, if we use the lunch line situation from before, we can see how this works. Let's say that you handle your anger by throwing a lunch tray at the wall. You can literally use the Anger



Rules as a checklist...Did I hurt others? *No*. Did I hurt myself? *No*. Did I hurt property? *Yes*. So, throwing a tray at the wall was, in fact, dirty anger!

Let's imagine that you thought before acting...You're rising up the Anger Thermometer because of the person who is standing too close and bumping into you. You think to yourself..."I need to get the teacher or I'm doing to hit this kid". Will this hurt others? *No*. Will it hurt you? *No*. Will it hurt property? *No*. That would be an example of clean anger!

Take a minute to list some examples from your life of both clean and dirty anger:

Clean Anger

Dirty Anger

## **A Final Word**

This booklet is by no means a comprehensive plan for managing anger. It does, however, offer a simple, brain-based strategy for thinking about anger. Often, in dealing with anger, it is necessary to work with a therapist. Helping your child learn to manage all emotions, particularly anger, prepares them for a happier and healthier future.

Here are some resources that you will find helpful as you nurture your child's emotional health:

*A Volcano in My Tummy: Helping Children Handle Anger* by Eliane Whitehouse & Warwick Pudney

*The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson