

26 Phrases to Calm an Angry Child



Whether your child has a slow-burning fuse or explodes like a firecracker at the slightest provocation, every child can benefit from anger management skills. As parents, we lay the foundation for this skill set by governing our own emotions in the face of an angry outburst. Next time you are dealing with a tantrum from a toddler, or a cold shoulder from a teen, put your best foot forward by trying one of these 26 phrases:

1. **Instead of: Stop throwing things!**

Try this: When you throw your toys, I think you don't like playing with them. Is that what's going on?

This speaker/listener technique is designed to help communicate feelings in a non-confrontational manner. Not only does this keep the lines of communication open, you are modeling how to phrase a situation from your perspective, which in turn gives your child a chance to rephrase events in his (her) perspective.

2. **Instead of: Big kids don't do this!**

Try this: Big kids and even grown ups sometimes have big feelings. It's OK, these feelings will pass.

Let's be honest. The older your kids get, the bigger the problems they face, the bigger the feelings they have. Telling them that big kids don't experience anger, frustration, or anxiety is simply untrue. It also encourages children to avoid or quash emotions and prevents processing them in a healthy manner.

3. **Instead of: Don't be angry!**

Try this: I get angry too sometimes. Let's try our warrior cry to get those angry feelings in check.

A [recent study](#) reveals that yelling when we are physically hurt can actually interrupt pain messages being sent to the brain. Although your child may not be in pain per se, a warrior cry can work to release angry energy in a playful manner. Choose a warrior cry or mantra together with your child (think of William Wallace from the movie *Brave Heart* screaming "Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeedom!").

4. **Instead of: Don't you dare hit!**

Try this: It's OK to be angry, but I won't let you hit. We need to keep everyone safe.

This gets the message firmly across that the emotion is okay, but the action is not. Separating the two will help your child learn to do likewise.

5. **Instead of: You're being so difficult!**

Try this: This is a tough one, huh? We're going to figure this out together.

When children are digging in their heels, it is important to understand why. This phrase reinforces the idea that you are on the same team, working toward the same goal.

6. **Instead of: That's it, you're getting a time out!**

Try this: Let's go to our calm down space together.

This flips the script of "time out" to "time in," allowing for reconnection instead of isolation.

7. **Instead of: Brush your teeth right now!**

Try this: Do you want to brush Elmo's teeth first or yours?

For toddlers, tantrums are a way to exert control over their environment. This way, you are offering your toddler a choice, and in turn, some control.

8. **Instead of: Eat your food or you will go to bed hungry!**
Try this: What can we do to make this food yummy?

This places the responsibility of finding a solution back on your child.

9. **Instead of: Your room is disgusting! You are grounded unless this gets clean.**
Try this: How about we just start cleaning this itty bitty corner of your room? I'll give you a hand.

In lieu of focusing on the overwhelming task of cleaning up a huge mess, shift the goal to simply starting. Starting an undesirable task can provide the impetus and momentum to continue.

10. **Instead of: We. Are. LEAVING!**
Try this: What do you need to do to be ready to leave?

Allow children to think through processes for the transitions in their lives. This helps avoid a power struggle and it gives them a chance to signal to their minds that they are making a transition to a new activity. This is also an excellent routine to role-play when you are not actually going anywhere.

11. **Instead of: Stop whining!**
Try this: How about a quick "do over" in your normal voice?

Sometimes kids whine and don't even realize it. By asking them to rephrase in a normal tone, you are teaching them that the *way* they say things matters.

12. **Instead of: Stop complaining!**
Try this: I hear you. Can you come up with a solution?

Taken from: <http://www.positive-parents.org/2016/05/26-phrases-to-calm-angry-child.html>

Again, this places the responsibility back on the child. Next time your child is complaining non-stop about school/dinner/siblings, ask her to brainstorm solutions. Remind her there are no wrong answers, and the sillier she is, the better.

13. **Instead of: How many times do I have to say the same thing???**
Try this: I can see you didn't hear me the first time. How about when I say it to you, you whisper it back to me?

Having your child repeat back what he hears solidifies your message. Varying the volume adds an element of fun to the request.

14. **Instead of: Stop getting frustrated!**
Try this: Is that ____ too hard right now? Let's take a break and come back to it in 17 minutes.

It sounds random, but a [research-based formula](#) for productivity is to work for 52 minutes, break for 17. By taking a break from task-related stress, you come back to it ready to begin again, focused and more productive than before. The same concept applies to homework, practicing the piano, or playing a sport.

15. **Instead of: Go to your room!**
Try this: I'm going to stay right here by you until you're ready for a hug.

Again, isolation sends the message that there is something wrong with your child. By giving her space until she is ready to re-engage, you are providing reassurance that you will always be there for her.

16. **Instead of: You are embarrassing me!**
Try this: Let's go somewhere private so we can sort this out.

Remember, it's not about you. It's about him and his feelings. By removing both of you from the situation, you are reinforcing the team effort without drawing attention to the behavior.

17. **Instead of: (Sighing and rolling your eyes)**

Try this: (Make eye contact, remember your child's greatest strengths, and give her a compassionate smile.)

Practice keeping it in perspective by seeing the strengths in your child.

18. **Instead of: You are impossible!**

Try this: You are having a tough time. Let's figure this out together.

Always, always separate the behavior from the child, reinforce the emotion, and work together to come up with a solution.

19. **Instead of: Stop yelling!**

Try this: I'm going to pretend I'm blowing out birthday candles. Will you do it with me?

Deep breathing helps restore the body to a calm state. Being playful with how you engage in the breathing hastens cooperation. For older children, ask them to breathe with you like Darth Vader does.

20. **Instead of: I can't deal with you right now!**

Try this: I'm starting to get frustrated, and I'm going to be right here calming down.

Teach children how to label and govern their emotions by modeling this in real time.

21. **Instead of: I'm done talking!**

**Try this: I love you. I need you to understand that it is not okay to _____.
Is there anything you need me to understand?**

This keeps the lines of communication open while expressing the emotion in a healthy way.

22. **Instead of: I am at the end of my rope!**

Try this: If green is calm, yellow is frustrated, and red is angry, I'm in the yellow zone headed toward red. What color are you? What can we do to get back to green?

Give children a visual to express how they are feeling. It may surprise you what they say, and what kind of solutions they come up with to change their direction.

23. **Instead of: I am NOT changing it!**

Try this: I'm sorry you don't like how I _____. How can we do better next time?

Shifting the focus from the event to the solution eliminates the power struggle associated with digging in your heels about the event.

24. **Instead of: Stop saying "No!"**

Try this: I hear you saying "No." I understand you do not want this. Let's figure out what we can do differently.

By acknowledging your child's "No," you are de-escalating the situation. Rather than arguing yes/no, change the script to focus on the future and the prospect of a solution.

25. **Instead of: Stop overreacting!**

Try this: You are having a big reaction to a big emotion. If your emotion had a monster's face, what would it look like?

When kids are tired, hungry, or overstimulated, they are going to overreact. Putting a face to the emotion externalizes the issue and allows children to respond to their inner monologue of anger. This subsequently helps them exercise control over the emotion.

26. **Instead of: Just stop!**

Try this: I'm here for you. I love you. You're safe. (Then, sit in stillness with your child and allow the emotion to rise up and pass.)

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When children are in the throes of anger or panic, often their bodies are experiencing a stress response whereby they literally feel unsafe. Letting them know they are safe supports them until the discomfort passes. This is a vital skill of resilience.

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