

Frank Jacobelli
Lynn Ann Watson



SmartHelp

for Good 'n' Angry Kids

Teaching Children to Manage Anger

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Frank Jacobelli and Lynn Ann Watson

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SmartHelp For Good 'n' Angry Kids

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Contents

*For Margaret Rose and Barbara Ann, for loving so well
and making so much possible*

1. Introduction: Why I Wrote This Book
2. Making Sense of the World
3. What I Learned About Myself from the Book
4. Chapter 1: The First Step to Understanding the World
5. The Importance of Understanding the World
6. Reading and Learning the World: A Guide to the Book

No book, including this one, can replace the services of a qualified health professional. Please use this book to teach your child to improve his or her behavior, and to help you in communicating with your child's doctor and/or mental health professional so you and your child can obtain the best care possible. If you suspect your child's behavior or thought process is a danger to himself/herself or someone else, seek medical attention for your child without delay.

About the Authors

Frank Jacobelli has treated children, adults, and families in a variety of clinical settings including private practice, community mental health, and inpatient psychiatric. He is an adjunct professor of social work at Western Nevada College, clinical director of the Eastern Sierra CISM Team, and cofounder of PsychEd Concepts, Inc. Since 1994, Frank has been a clinical coordinator for Enki Health and Research Systems where he developed a mental health program for a California Distinguished School.

L.A. Watson has been an early-learning education director, multiple subject teacher, special educator, special education administrator, and resource specialist. She has taught in both rural communities and inner-city schools. Lynn is a member of the Eastern Sierra CISM team and cofounder of PsychEd Concepts, Inc.



Photo by Katrina Allmett.

Foreword

Let me be the first to welcome you to this fine book.

I first met Frank Jacobelli at a seminar on bipolar disorder that I was presenting in Sacramento. My presentation included a segment on the 'Executive functions' of the brain, and how the brain can be 'exercised' to improve the functioning of the frontal lobes, thereby improving a person's ability to anticipate consequences, manage impulses, correctly interpret the nonverbal cues of others, and above all, to see one's self 'situationally.' During the seminar, I mentioned that kids, in particular, were very much in need of an activity book that they could use to exercise their frontal lobes and improve executive functioning.

Frank approached me during the break and asked if I would take a look at an activity book that he and his coauthor, a special educator, had been working on for several months. I did, and I was very pleased with what I saw. Finally, a user-friendly, hands-on activity book was born, packed with exactly the kinds of enjoyable activities that kids could use to learn to see themselves 'situationally!'

Since that initial meeting, the original workbook has grown into much more . . . a first-of-its kind, information packed book for parents, counselors, and teachers, looking to help kids manage anger and improve executive function, while drawing on the individual learning styles and preferences of the child.

SmartHelp for Good 'n' Angry Kids, a surefire winner, is likely to become the standard bearer by which other books for teaching kids to recognize, process, and express their feelings are measured.

My personal thanks go out to the authors, as well as my warm wishes to you, the reader. May these pages make a real difference in the life of your child.

Dr Jay

(Jay Carter, Psy. D., FPPR (candidate))

Acknowledgments

A note of thanks to Dr. Jay Carter for believing in this book in its infancy, for his ‘tweaking of our thinking,’ and for instilling in us the confidence required to see this project through to completion. To Stan Wakefield for his incredible ability to repeatedly bridge the gap between an author’s dream and a reality in black and white. Thanks to Al Bertrand, Karen Shield, Ruth Jelley, and everyone at Wiley-Blackwell for their efficiency and understated professionalism. Our thanks to Gopika and everyone at Laserwords for their insightful approach in delivering top-notch editing services. And most importantly, we wish to acknowledge the many kids who were our teachers. Thanks to each of you for demanding we recognize your uniqueness.

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Introducing SmartHelp for Good 'n' Angry Kids

The gem cannot be polished without friction.

— Chinese proverb

I doubt you would expect your child to know Algebra if he's never been taught. Is it reasonable then, to expect your child to know how to manage the often misunderstood emotion of anger without having been taught? We think not.

This book provides an all-new approach for allowing your child (for kids aged 9 to 13) to learn the skills necessary to manage (recognize, process, and appropriately express) anger, without having to rely upon the unhealthy and potentially destructive methods he's learned and relied upon until now. We're fairly confident that this describes your child; otherwise, you'd likely be reading the latest blockbuster instead.

SmartHelp is a one-of-a-kind approach to managing anger for two reasons. First, it calls upon your child's individual learning strengths in mastering the necessary skills for managing anger—skills such as self-soothing, accurately interpreting the actions of others, learning from positive role models, and paying attention to the body's warning signs that anger is brewing. Chapter 7 will acquaint you with the concept of individual learning styles, and how using these to overcome learning and behavioral challenges can make all the necessary difference. Thus the name 'SmartHelp.'

Second, we wholeheartedly buy into what the leading neuroscientists have concluded over the past several years: the human brain can change and adapt with proper exercise. The activities contained in this book are geared toward changing your child's brain for the better, strengthening the prefrontal cortex and making it more accessible when needed. The prefrontal cortex, housed within the frontal lobe of your child's brain, which sits just behind the forehead, is responsible for 'executive functions.' With proper executive function comes the ability to anticipate consequences, control impulses, and see one's self 'situationally.' More about your child's brain on anger, in Chapter 2.

But let's back up and take a few moments to acquaint you with how SmartHelp for Good 'n' Angry Kids came to be. We, the coauthors Frank Jacobelli and Lynn Ann Watson, are a mental health counselor and a special educator, with a combined 40 years of experience in our respective fields, having counseled and taught hundreds of kids. Over a period of several years, we worked in the same sparsely populated community and very often with the same challenging, defiant, reactive, disruptive, and just plain angry kids. Enthusiastically, we went about our individual work, using all of our skills, digging deeply into our bags of tricks for just the right teaching tool or counseling strategy. Often frustrated, we began to question why it was that a particular strategy (say, asking a child where it is in his body that he first feels his anger brewing) could work like a charm with one angry child, while the

same strategy would result in a furrowed brow and open-mouthed stare from a different child.

Many hours of discussion ensued, followed by months of trial and error, and then more discussion. Was it possible that the child who was able to respond to the above intervention with 'First I clench my fists, and then I feel a little sick to my stomach. Pretty soon my face feels like its on fire, and then I just want to start swinging!' is a strong *bodily-kinesthetic* learner (see Chapter 7), while the furrowed-browed child is not? Perhaps the furrowed-browed child happens not to have a great deal of awareness of his body, how it feels and how to use it, but is a strong *visual-spatial* learner. Perhaps an intervention better suited to this child is to ask him to look at simple drawings of faces displaying varying degrees of anger. Perhaps this *visual-spatial* learner can use this strategy to identify what kinds of events in his daily life result in which level of anger. Then perhaps, the helper can work with the child in coming up with specific ideas for managing the anger before it escalates to the next level. 'This face is me when I don't get picked for football at playtime.' (Practice memorizing three things you're good at.) 'This is me when my teacher writes my name on the board.' (Remind myself that I will keep my hands to myself in class tomorrow.) 'Here is me when Tommy takes my pencil.' (Let Tommy know that friends don't take things without asking, and carry an extra pencil just in case.)

Before paying attention to the individual learning strengths of kids, Frank was guilty of the same affliction as most mental health professionals. He believed that he could best get through to kids and adult clients alike, simply by talking at them, enlightening them with his *linguistic* insights, and curing their ills with his *spoken* clinical brilliance.

In hindsight, he was long overdue for an ego check. Could it be that mental health professionals and teachers manage to become educated and gainfully employed because *they* happen to be strong *verbal-linguistic* learners in a society (and an educational system) that tends to value those with strong verbal abilities over those who learn best by other means? And are they then trying to reach kids by using the counseling and teaching methods with which *they themselves* are most comfortable?

Was anyone paying attention to the way kids learn best? In fairness, individual learning styles have received a good deal of attention from teachers, particularly special educators, over the past 15 years or so. Far less attention has been paid by counselors and mental health professionals. Special educators had long ago recognized the need to teach 'special' kids by special means, and Lynn (coauthor of this book), as a special educator, had developed a keen interest in the unique and individual abilities of the special kids she taught. It was soon apparent that, not only did these kids learn *more* from teaching methods that took their individual learning strengths into consideration, but when taught by *learning-style aware methods*, these students learned not only the material presented but they learned about themselves as well. Once equipped with knowing their individual learning strengths and preferences, these students were able to educate others in their lives (i.e. parents, teachers, and bosses) on how they can approach a problem outside the classroom in a way that maximizes the chance of solving it—useful self-knowledge that can benefit a child for a lifetime.

Brought together by our joint efforts to reach the same kids in a small community, we realized that if recognizing and using children's individual learning styles could make it easier for them to successfully learn schoolwork, why wouldn't it also be useful to parents, teachers, and counselors striving to help angry kids learn to recognize, process, and appropriately express feelings? Why should the benefits of recognizing and using the individual learning strengths of a child be limited to the special education classroom?

And where was the learning-style aware *workbook* for kids with anger problems that parents, teachers, and counselors could use with their kids, to teach them about anger and what to do with it? Well, it was nowhere to be found, so we came up with this one. And we are

very pleased to know that you have it before you at this very moment. First and foremost, SmartHelp for Good 'n' Angry Kids is a compilation of nearly every activity or intervention we have used in our work, to reach and teach the angry child, and arranged according to learning style.

In Appendix 1 you will find the learning style survey and scoring materials; everything you and your child will need to learn about your child's individual learning strengths and interests. The SmartHelp workbook activities (the real 'meat' of this book) are grouped together by learning style. Though simple to use, you will find more detail on how to make the most of the SmartHelp activities with your kids in Chapter 9, titled 'Before You Begin.'

Originally designed simply as a one-of-a-kind workbook, SmartHelp for Good 'n' Angry Kids has evolved into much more. In Chapter 2, we will explore the often ignored, often misunderstood subject of anger. The reader will likely be surprised to learn that even the experts don't agree on a number of the key concepts that surround the topic of anger, and surprisingly, in a world understandably concerned about violent crime, gang violence, schoolyard bullying, school shootings, road rage, and the ravages of war, little research on anger has been scientifically documented.

Is anger a normal, healthy emotion or a human shortcoming? Are some children born angry or do they learn destructive anger from others? How do anger, hostility, and aggression differ? Is it best to simply ignore the things that can make us angry or is this 'stuffing' anger, and is stuffing dangerous to our health, well-being, and relationships?

You will also find an easy-to-understand overview of *your child's brain on anger* in Chapter 2, written by nonscientists for nonscientists.

In Chapter 4 we take a hard look at character. What is it? Is there a character gene or is character taught? If character doesn't come 'factory-installed,' how do we go about instilling it in our kids?

Chapter 5 takes on the uncomfortable topic of 'labeling' children. What determines whether a child is diagnosable or just feisty, high-spirited, or passionate? What are the facts about oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, and attention deficit disorder (ADD)/attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and what can be done about the 'symptoms' that result in these unflattering labels being handed out to children?

In Chapter 6 you will learn about getting through to your child, as well as how to create a suitable interpersonal environment for engaging your child in the SmartHelp activities. Additionally, here you will find important strategies for combating the stress that comes with dealing with an angry child—emotional first aid for yourself, if you will.

We will introduce you to a few of the children we have worked with over the years in Chapter 8. You will learn about specific problems and how they were addressed. Most importantly, we will share what we learned from each of the children we discuss. The names of the children, and in some cases, certain specific details that might make the child identifiable, were changed to protect their privacy.

In Chapter 9 you will find important information for making the most of the SmartHelp activities. Included are brief vignettes, geared toward helping you, the 'helper,' parent, teacher, or counselor, get a feel for using a particular SmartHelp activity for addressing certain anger issues or behavior problems. You will be encouraged to develop the theme of each SmartHelp activity with your child, tailoring it to his specific needs. The simple and fun activity can provide a positive framework for healthy quality time for you and your child, crucial for your child's future ability to foster healthy adult relationships.

When working with children having difficulty managing their anger, we have found these SmartHelp activities invaluable for teaching children to better understand their emotions, to self-soothe when necessary, and to see the ‘Big Picture’ in their interactions with others. A child able to see the big picture is a child less likely to misinterpret the actions of others, better able to put his feelings into context, and more likely to analyze a situation before reacting inappropriately. We are confident that you will have similar results with your kids.

Preserving the anonymity and respecting the confidentiality of our clients, students, and families is the cornerstone of our professional ethics, and of utmost importance. Therefore, names, descriptions, and facts that might make it possible to identify our clients, students, and families, have been altered throughout the text. In some cases, we have blended pertinent facts related to more than one child or family, in an effort to allow the reader to get the most out of the concept we are seeking to convey. None of the case studies discussed is meant to be a complete or completely factual account of any particular child or family’s history or progress under our care. In most instances, the facts of the case studies are recounted to the best of our recollection. To make the text more readable, we have often used the pronoun ‘he’ rather than including both ‘he’ and ‘she.’

We wish you great success in teaching your kids to manage their anger. To grow to be a healthy, happy, and well-adjusted individual is your child’s birthright. We are proud you’ve chosen to bring SmartHelp for Good ‘n’ Angry Kids along on this very important journey.

Making Sense of Anger

Passion, though a bad regulator, is a powerful spring.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, American poet (1803–1882)

Remarkably, little research exists on the topic of anger. In contrast, there is an abundance of books and programs for helping in the management of anger *problems*. Although the majority of these books and programs are geared toward managing anger in adults, we contend that the time to learn about anger is in the beginning, before bad habits become entrenched, and before young brains are wired to respond to anger inappropriately or even destructively. Perhaps, if it were possible, an even more effective approach to behavior management would be to bring children into a world in which aggression is not considered a worthwhile, often acceptable, and at times, even preferred problem-solving strategy. In the words of William Inge, the mid-twentieth-century American playwright, ‘The proper time to influence the character of a child is about a hundred years before he’s born.’

The authors of the aforementioned books and programs often disagree on some of the core concepts surrounding anger and what to do with it. Is anger a normal human emotion or is it a human shortcoming? Does it serve a worthwhile purpose, needing to be recognized and expressed, or should the goal of the enlightened individual be to rise above the primitive inclination to feel anger in the first place? Are anger and hostility one and the same? Do anger and aggression go hand in hand, or should a distinction be made between anger that is controlled and that which is uncontrolled? Are *bad* people more prone to experience anger than *good* people?

What are your thoughts about anger? Perhaps you haven’t given the topic much consideration at all ... until now. The purpose of this chapter is to give you, the parent, teacher, or counselor of an angry child, the opportunity to do just that. Before giving our conclusions to the questions posed earlier, let’s give the topic some historical perspective and explore what some of the experts have to say on the subject.

The ancient Greek philosophers, Galen and Seneca, considered anger a type of madness—worthless, even for war, and that ‘red-faced people are hot tempered because of excessive hot and dry humors’ (Kemp and Strongman, 1995). Aristotle had a slightly different perspective, more in line with modern times, believing that anger had its value, particularly for addressing injustice.

Medieval Christianity rejected anger as one of the seven cardinal, or deadly, sins. Saint Basil regarded it as a ‘reprehensible temporary madness’ (Fiero), but like Aristotle long before, some Christian writers of the day attributed some value to anger when aroused by injustice.

Early modern philosophers Immanuel Kant and David Hume offered historically relevant views on anger. Kant considered vengeance as vicious—going beyond the defense of man’s dignity, while at the same time viewing a lack of responsiveness to social injustice as a sign