

# Director's Corner

## **Anger & Mood Swings in Tweens & Teens**

by Beth Hall

Beginning as early as ten and continuing as late as their early twenties, young people are learning to manage their emotions as they attempt to define themselves in the context of their world. Mood swings and anxiety, often caused by stress, are well-known characteristics of puberty. Anger and rages can surprise both your child and you; how did your mild-mannered school-ager transform so quickly into the tween/teen they are now becoming?

**The science of the tween and teen mood swings and anger** Mood swings are rapidly changing emotional states. Teens are more reactive to positive and negative events than adults; they live in the moment and often experience things more intensely as a normal part of their development. Emotions and strong "gut" reactions are housed in the limbic part of the brain. When teens or adults are angry their brains are low on serotonin, which is an inhibitory neurotransmitter that reduces the feeling of anger. We often exhibit anger in response to fear, which in life-or-death situations can be very healthy, especially since anger escalates quickly. Anger releases adrenalin, and other neurotransmitters as well, which in teens are exacerbated by the surging hormones of puberty. Stress also plays into the way that teen moods can swing, by causing the release of THP, which in an adult or child creates calm in the limbic brain, but in the adolescent stimulates the hippocampus, which regulates emotion.

Understanding the biology that regulates these emotions allows parents to be more sympathetic to the changes and emotional rollercoaster rides their children are facing during these years. Looking at the teen years as a stage, not dissimilar to the "terrible twos" or menopause, you can see that many of the strong responses you observe in your child are developmentally typical. However, if your tween or teen has a sudden change in their ability to participate in their regular activities or loses many of their close friends, then you should consider a mental health evaluation to see if there are more than "normal" mood swings happening for your teen.

**Anger is a feeling, not a behavior.** When we perceive a situation as difficult or painful, changes occur in our minds and bodies to prepare us to respond to danger. This "fight, flight or freeze" response includes a faster heart and breathing rate, increased blood to muscles of arms and legs, cold or clammy hands and feet, upset stomach and/or a sense of dread. When

someone is in the throws of this response, it is not likely that they will respond to reason or argument.

Be careful not to rush in to touch an angry teen. Try to get them to sit down if possible because the physical symptoms of anger are muted when people sit rather than stand.

And remember, teens are still children. Behavior is their language. If you are seeing eruptions that are upsetting to you as a parent, it is safe to assume they are experiencing fear and anger in response to things that are happening for them that they really need your help to sort out and resolve. They aren't necessarily going to sit on your lap and tell you their problems (if they ever did) but they still need the same kind of support and soothing belief in them as human beings in order to succeed. These years don't take less of your parenting energy and time, if anything they take more as you work with them to understand what is going on and help them find responses you can all feel good about.

**Parent's job is to teach kids to handle anger, which means being a role model.** As is often the case with parenting, it begins with us asking ourselves what we might be bringing to the table that could be either causing or adding to the conflicts that happen with teens. When children begin to move from childhood toward the teen years, it is often parents who feel sad or upset because their baby is growing up. Ask yourself honestly what you may be bringing to the situation that contributes to some of the conflicts. How do you choose to communicate your anger or frustrations? Will you be happy with your child doing the same? Do your emotions control you, or do you control your emotions? If you want to help your child control their emotions, obviously you have to be in control of your own—at least most of the time. And when you haven't been, consider being the first to acknowledge your own mistakes so that you can show your tween or teen that it is okay to make mistakes sometimes, so long as you apologize and try again.

**Your biggest goal as a parent is to maintain and develop rapport with your child.** If you don't have good communication with your tween/teen then you aren't going to have a lot of influence or input into their choices or understanding of the world as they grow older. This begins with giving respect to your child and really listening to their point of view. Sometimes this is going to mean expressing

interest in topics that may not seem very significant to you simply because they are critical to your child. Pay attention to your child's verbal and non-verbal cues; acknowledge their frustration even if you find yourself not agreeing with their point of view.

Offer advice judiciously, so that they know you are as interested in understanding and listening to them as you are in giving them your own perspective. Children do want to understand their parents' point of view and most of them want to please their parents, but if the balance feels like you are giving advice (read: criticism) more than listening or noticing when they handle things well on their own, they will start to reject and fear your advice because it makes them feel bad about themselves.

**When you have blowups, focus on how to bring the temperature down.** As with any crisis, begin by taking a breath and try to understand what is going on for each of you. What are the triggers? Focus on feelings rather than behavior as you try to answer this question. Eventually it will be important to talk with your child about the feelings but that can rarely be done in the moment.

When faced with strong emotions in your child try to use de-escalating techniques before delving into the reasons or consequences for behaviors. Remain calm and try not to show fear or anxiety. If your child is misbehaving, be firm about limitations without raising your voice. Make statements that are simple and direct, like "I can see you are really angry right now, I think we both should take some time to calm down and talk about this after dinner," or "If you need me to decide this right now I will need to say no, but if you prefer I could think about it overnight and we could talk about it at breakfast before I decide." Generally it takes thirty to forty minutes to calm down physiologically from a limbic surge and in teens it may take even longer, so plan your discussion and attempts to reason or make up accordingly. People who are angry need a lot of space, so avoid touching them. If you are attacked, use only enough force to protect yourself or restrain your child; do not initiate anything that might be perceived as aggression.

Do not take hostile statements personally; children have to learn to manage themselves while they are angry so that they don't make overstatements. Many of us have engaged in over-reactive behavior when we have been upset; don't hold them to standards they can't yet live up to any more than you would hold a two-year-old to school-age behavior. Holly van Gulden (Real Parents, Real Children) reminds us that we all have many parts and if we respond to our children by acknowledging those different parts, we allow them to maintain a sense of themselves as positive along with the negative feelings or behavior that may be coming out now. All of us need to be reminded of the things we are doing well along with those areas where we struggle. Children who are vulnerable—as all of our adopted tweens and teens are—are particularly susceptible to low self-esteem, making it very important to balance our discussions with them so that we spend as many words and as much time acknowledging the positives as we do talking about the challenges.

Let's say your child comes home from school having gotten a poor grade on a test after studying hard to pass. As soon as you sit down at dinner and ask about homework for the night and how the test went, your child slams a cup on the table, spilling milk everywhere. Little brother is crying because the milk got into his peas. The dog begins to bark as everyone begins to yell and your teen knocks over a chair, storming out of the room and slamming the door.

Well after the episode has occurred (maybe even a day or two), make it a point to sit down with your child to discuss what happened. Educate your child (which means you will have already educated yourself) about how emotions often trigger rage responses or strong mood swings. Remember that your overarching goals are connection to your child and emotion coaching, so that eventually your child can anticipate and thus control his or her own emotions. Sit down with your teen and discuss how it felt to fail the test and begin to look at how that might have impacted his or her responses to the questions at the dinner table. Think together about alternate ways of responding to the news and be sure to listen to ways that you could also alter your behavior (maybe asking about tests during a chaotic dinner time isn't a good strategy.) Making compromises that work for all of you will demonstrate to your child that his or her feelings are important and you are listening to them. It will also model the importance of your child's own compromises as well as willingness to go back and analyze communication and think about how to do it better, so that everyone can process their feelings and not "lose it" with one another. You are acting as your child's emotion coach!

**But what about the behavior that needs to be modified?** It is important to clearly identify your expectations regarding behavior. Consequences are sometimes necessary but generally, if you and your tween or teen are learning to manage emotions better and understanding your "hot buttons," unwanted behaviors are likely to tone down and often they will actually disappear. When consequences are required, remember they don't need to be given immediately. Take your time and make the punishment fit the crime. If there are natural consequences outside the family (for instance, the child who cuts a class is forced to attend detention at school) consider seriously if it is really appropriate or necessary to add additional consequences onto what your child is already suffering. Be sure to allow do-overs. Both you and your child are learning to deal with new emotions and new ways of relating as your child becomes more independent from you—neither of you are likely to get it right every time. The goal is to learn, to communicate and to help them understand and feel good about themselves. Excessive punishing often does the opposite, leading to less communication and increasingly worse behavior.

Don't get discouraged. These years can feel scary but they are also rich and exciting if we learn how to communicate with our evolving children. It is exciting to see them becoming themselves. As you engage in conversations you can work towards a deepening intimacy between you, and the thrill of seeing your child become a thoughtful, ethical, and caring human being cannot be underestimated. Take a breath and try to enjoy the ride.