

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: I find myself getting so angry at my 4-year-old son. I have always struggled with my temper. I don't want to be that kind of dad. Can you give me some suggestions?

ANSWER: Sadly, I hear confessions like this from a significant number of fathers. I'm encouraged that you "don't want to be that kind of dad." The comment, however, begs the question: What are you willing to do? Too often, not much! Too often men give lip service to wanting to change their problem managing anger, but have done little to attenuate their tempers. They "feel bad" about blowing up...things get a little better...until the next explosion...then they "feel bad" again.

I have no doubt that after the blow up, most dads do honestly "feel bad", but **feelings alone** are not enough to break the blow-up cycle and initiate any real change. **Information alone** is not enough to break the blow-up cycle. The blow up cycle must be disrupted/derailed by feelings, information and a plan. However, before you get the "list" of what to do, some questions and thoughts are in order:

1. God's Word instructs us: "In your anger, do not sin." Every one of us does anger; a tiny minority does godly anger. Godly anger is just, holy, pure and directed at evil, rebellion, defiance and disobedience, for the purpose of redemption, sanctification, correction and re-establishing relationships. Generally, human anger is punishing, cathartic, self-absorbed and directed at that which frustrates, for the purpose of self-protection, self-justification, violation, and intimidation.
2. Are you aware that all behaviors have a function? Understand the function of your anger, and **why you cling to that behavior despite the effects on your son**. At some psychological level, the function of your blow-ups must be incredibly attractive to you. For men, anger generally functions to **redirect** feelings of frustration, inadequacy, failure, impotence and hurt to a secondary emotion that is energizing, powerful, emotionally manageable, and easier on the ego. Generally,

men use anger to intimidate, isolate, dominate, violate and abdicate. What function does anger serve in your relationship with your son?

3. Do you really understand the effect your continuing blow-ups have on your son? Theologically, in your sinful anger, you are **misrepresenting the character of God** to your son. We know from both common sense and research that children form much of their concept of God the Father by experiencing their earthly fathers. (Isn't that horrifically scary!) Why hasn't that information alone propelled you to change? Sadly, something else is more important to you than your son. Emotionally, your anger puts up a barrier in the relationship between you and your son. Emotional closeness is shutdown as self-protection* takes over. As your son grows older, his hurt, resulting from your anger, will turn to vengeance and/or withdrawal. In addition, you are modeling both inappropriate, immature, and damaging ways of handling anger. Guess who will be struggling with his anger in 10 years? Consider how many jails are filled with anger men.
4. Do you understand the difference between legitimate and illegitimate anger? How will your son know when anger is required and justified (even Godly) if he mostly experiences illegitimate anger from you?
5. What does repentance look like for the father who blows up habitually? It involves far more than just feeling bad about what continues to happen. It requires taking action to make restitution and permanent change. Professional help along with real accountability is often essential.
6. How are you actively, daily, rigorously and humbly seeking God regarding your struggle? Do you understand how your ungodly anger affects your relationship with Him? Can you foresee how God can use this struggle as an opportunity to draw you ever more dependent on Him, value forgiveness, and glorify His character in you and your relationship with your son?

Those points made, are there situational, genetic, personality, family history and mental considerations that mitigate your individual struggle? Of course, but they do not justify **continual, ongoing** blow-ups at your

son. Again, what will you do? Feelings are fine, but they have not motivated transformation. Information is fine, but it too hasn't motivated transformation. There are accountability men's groups in conjunction with anger management skills and techniques that can help. Why haven't you yet availed yourself?

Generally these techniques disrupt/redirect the blow-up cycle in what is call the *fantasy phase* in behavioral addictions. This phase is when the person begins to think about the behavior (i.e. "I can tell I'm on the road to a blow-up."). The person is taught, practices and the implements the disruption or redirection technique(s) as he is also attending an accountability group. Often, men want to disrupt/redirect the blow-up cycle during the repentance phase (i.e. "I feel really bad about what I just did, and I won't do it again."). Disruption/redirection during the repentance phase is ineffective (The same way it is ineffective in disrupting pornography or substance addictions.).

You can also hold yourself more accountable by making restitution with your son. Generally, change has the best chance of occurring during the restitution part of repentance. Explain to your son just what restitution is, and what you will do when you literally "blow it". **Restitution should require significant sacrifice** (What would happen if you had one of your fingers cut off every time you blew up at him? Unthinkable, of course, but it gives you an idea of how true accountability would change behavior.). Continuous litanies of "I'm sorry" won't produce change, and it will cheapen how your son understands forgiveness.

You have much work to do, thoughts to think, and prayers to pray. However, this behavior change is doable! Get started!

Jack Lipski, M.A.

(Permission to copy granted for personal use only.)

*Brain impulses go the brainstem (fight or flight) part of the brain and effectively bypass the thoughtful, decision making prefrontal cortex.

