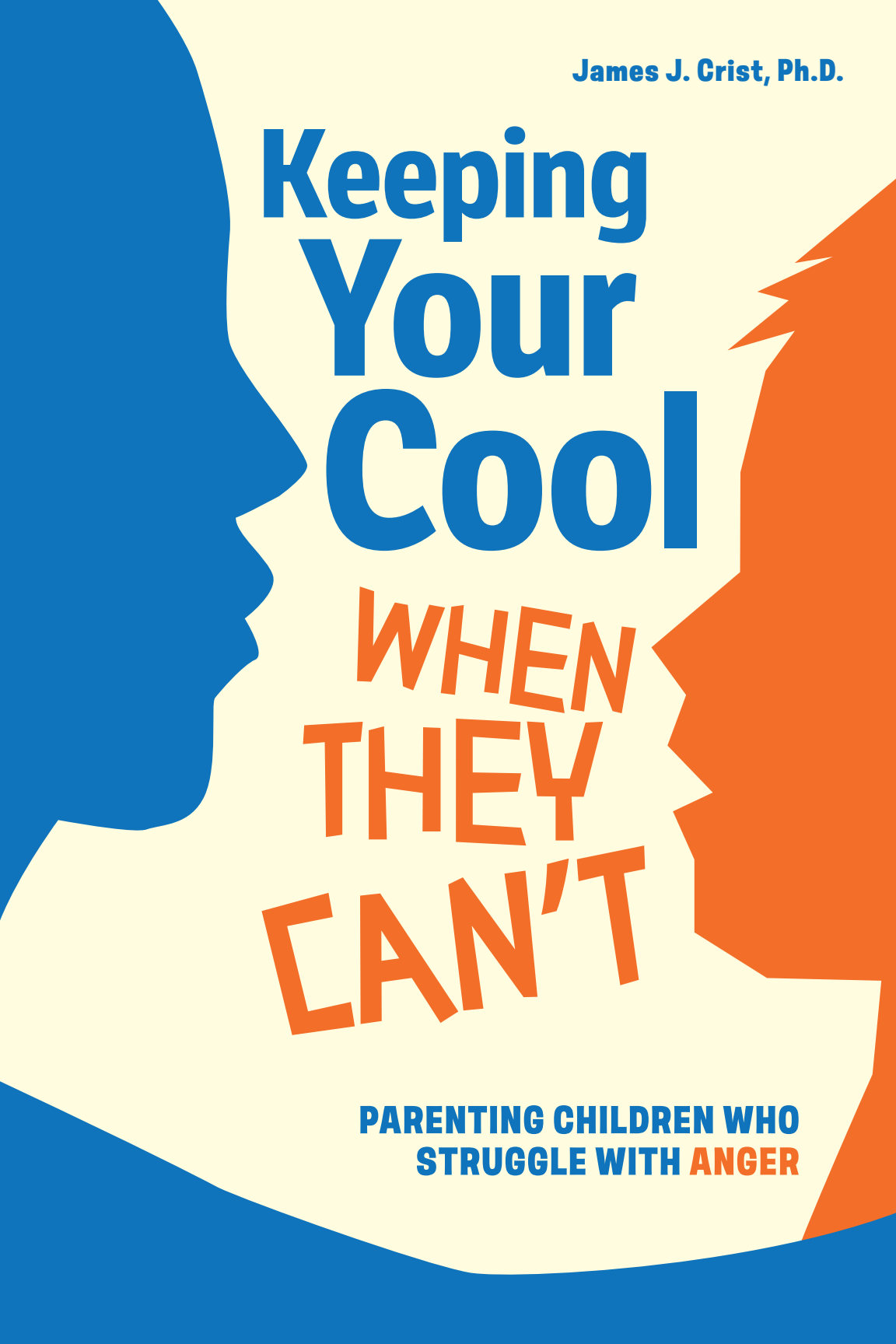


A stylized graphic of a parent and child in profile, facing each other. The parent's head is a solid blue silhouette on the left. The child's head is an orange silhouette on the right, with a jagged, flame-like top. The background is a light cream color.

James J. Crist, Ph.D.

Keeping Your Cool

WHEN
THEY
CAN'T

PARENTING CHILDREN WHO
STRUGGLE WITH **ANGER**

Praise for *Keeping Your Cool When They Can't*

“Reading this book is like having a conversation with a wise and caring friend. But this friend is a therapist and scholar who can actually explain in plain language the physical, social, and developmental factors that underly children’s anger, and offer parents the know-how and confidence to move families forward. The reader will sense that Dr. Crist understands their child and also understands the pain and frustrations that parenting a child who struggles with anger can bring. The strategies and resources he offers in this book are supported by decades of research and are presented in a warm, easy-to-absorb style for stressed and busy parents.”

—Sally MacKain, Ph.D., licensed psychologist and professor, University of North Carolina Wilmington

“This is such an important book. Anger can have serious consequences, so it’s important for the whole family that parents learn how to manage their child’s anger—and their own. This book is loaded with useful strategies to bring more peace to your home and more confidence to your child.”

—Ari Tuckman, PsyD, ADHD thought leader and author of *The ADHD Productivity Manual*

“Dr. Crist’s book provides a rarely seen level of clarity and direction for parents struggling with a child’s anger management challenges. Dr. Crist explains and offers ways for parents to implement a consistent and helpful approach to their child’s difficulties. Helping parents see how their own anger management can influence a child’s growth, he lays out a practical guideline to parenting angry kids. I think you will find this book both practical and educational.”

— Peter Robbins, MD, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

“Dr. Crist has an amazing ability to break down topics. After reading this book, I feel like I fully understand the topic—causes, contributing factors, and steps for prevention and/or management. Reading *Keeping Your Cool When They Can't* felt like I was having a conversation with a friend. Dr. Crist is compassionate, informative, and provides a wide range of resources.”

—Nancy Delaney Winans, LCSW

Praise for *I'm Here: A Peer Counseling Guide for Teens*

“Professional therapist Crist brings together his knowledge, experience, and skills to this teen-focused and friendly text that not only educates and informs readers about peer counseling strategies but also shows that they are not alone in their feelings.”

—*Booklist*

Praise for *What's the Big Deal About Addictions?: Answers and Help for Teens*

“A valuable resource for education and self-help.”

—*Booklist*

“Critically important and unreservedly recommended.”

—*Children's Bookwatch*

Keeping Your Cool

WHEN THEY CAN'T

**PARENTING CHILDREN
WHO STRUGGLE WITH ANGER**

JAMES J. CRIST, PH.D.

free spirit
PUBLISHING



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For all the parents and kids I have worked
with over the years—I have seen how
anger can be destructive in relationships
and how learning to manage anger
constructively can go a long way toward
building happier family relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

Anger is a normal, yet powerful, human emotion that can be hard to navigate—hard for adults and even harder for our kids. Perhaps your child says or does things when they're angry that in turn make you angry. It may seem that even when you are trying your best to be fair and reasonable, your kid can put up such a fuss that it's hard not to get upset, yell back, punish them, or ground them for life. In my years of working with families, many parents tell me they would never have dared talk to their parents the way their kids talk to them. They say they feel at a loss for how they should respond to their child's anger or are stuck in an unproductive cycle that is undermining their relationship with their kid. If you are going through the same struggles with your child, I hope this book can help.

Anger is part of the fight, flight, or freeze response that helps keep us safe when we are in danger. It is also a normal response to frustration, to not getting what we want, to struggling to master a challenge, and to feeling hurt or rejected. Learning to control anger is a skill that develops as a child's brain matures. For most kids, their anger is short-lived and not destructive, and their ability to express their anger rather than act it out improves over time. However, for some kids, anger is more severe. It is out of proportion to the situation that triggered it, it's much harder for them to control, and it can lead to aggression or even violence. Kids with additional challenges, such as mental health conditions, are especially prone to having problems controlling their anger.

In my practice, I have found that problems with anger are a common reason parents seek help and guidance. You are not alone. Learning to effectively parent your kid through their anger is important, especially because young children who



You Never
let me do what
I want!

exhibit more anger compared to other kids their age, and whose anger doesn't start to decrease after toddlerhood as is typical, are at greater risk of developing a number of issues during their childhood and adolescence, including problems with peers, struggles with school, difficulties making and keeping friends, aggression, anxiety, and depression.¹ Anger also affects everyone in the family.



But I don't
want to clean
my room!

Although many of the ideas in this book can be helpful in parenting kids with mild anger problems, they are especially important when parenting kids who have more serious struggles with managing and expressing their anger. If this sounds like your child, know that this book is here to help. Needing this kind of support does not mean you are an ineffective or poor parent; it just means that you need some specialized tools to help you keep your cool. This book provides you with those tools to respond to your child's anger, help them express anger constructively, and teach them better ways to cope.

About Me and My Approach

I've been working as a child and adolescent psychologist for over thirty years. I've worked with kids who struggle with anger, and their families. Like many people in the field, I came from a more traditional approach—helping parents set limits and figure out consequences for kids when they misbehaved. But the more I learned about various mental health conditions, and the more I listened to the kids I was helping and how they felt about getting in trouble for their reactions to frustrating situations, the more I realized that there had to be a better way. These are a few experts who helped me find that better way.

The book *The Explosive Child* had a big impact on me. The author, Dr. Ross W. Greene, emphasizes that “kids do well when they can.”² Through



I hate you!

this perspective, I came to learn that most of the time, there are underlying thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that contribute to a child's expression of anger. I also found that listening carefully and empathizing with a child's feelings and point of view, rather than getting on their case for past behavior, helped them feel understood. This, in turn, helped them be

more open to my suggestions of different ways to express their anger and cope with other strong emotions. And I found that sharing with parents this new perspective that “kids do well when they can” helped parents see their child’s anger in a different, more empathetic way, which allowed them to respond more calmly in heated situations.

Many of the concepts advocated by the creators of Love and Logic parenting (loveandlogic.com) and Calm Parenting (celebratecalm.com) have also informed my approach to helping families deal with a child’s anger. Love and Logic parenting focuses on “locking in your love” before telling your child what the consequences of their behavior might be. The goal here is to be a “consultant parent,” where you help kids become good decision-makers, which includes how they choose to respond to difficult situations. The creators of Calm Parenting share excellent strategies to help parents stay calm, even in the face of their child’s anger.

The founder, Kirk Martin, developed his strategies based on his struggles with his teenage son, realizing that his original approach was making things worse. These concepts will be explained further throughout the book.



You're the
worst mom
ever!

No one solution will work for every child, and I apply ideas from all these experts and more in my practice, drawing on my years of experience as well. I have found that listening respectfully to kids and validating their emotions makes a huge difference in their ability to hear what you have to say and be open to your suggestions on managing their feelings. This is why I almost always meet with just the kids first when they start therapy with me so that I can get their perspective before I hear more from their parents. I often think of an eight-year-old boy I once worked with and how proud I was of him when he was upset about something his dad told him in session. Instead of yelling or having an outburst, this boy put his hands on his hips and told his dad, in a raised but not disrespectful voice, “Dad, I’m mad at you!” This story is a great reminder of how teaching kids to verbalize their feelings in direct ways allows them to be heard and makes it easier for them to work through big feelings and settle down. Fortunately, you can learn strategies to help your child manage their anger and express it constructively.

A COUPLE THINGS TO KNOW

Some parents think that just finding the right punishment will help their child behave better. While punishment and yelling can sometimes stop a behavior in the moment, they often undermine the relationship you have with your child, and they don't help your kid learn better ways to express their anger and cope with strong feelings. For kids with anger issues, yelling and punishments can contribute to an escalation of their anger. And using corporal punishment, such as spanking or hitting, often makes aggression worse. Following the guidance of child development experts, this book is firmly against the use of corporal punishment.

While reading this book, you'll notice the term *parent* being used. The strategies in these pages are helpful to anyone involved in raising a child, whether you're a stepparent, a foster parent, or a grandparent or you fill another role. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that when it comes to disciplining kids, the child's primary caregiver should take the lead as much as possible. Kids who struggle with anger often have a harder time responding when other adults "tell them what to do," especially if they have not established a close bond with them.

About This Book

This book addresses child and adolescent anger. I open each chapter with a brief example of how anger can affect kids and families. You will probably recognize your family in some of these stories, while others may seem unfamiliar. My hope is that these stories show you you're not alone in dealing with anger; there are many families out there like yours.

The early chapters discuss anger more generally. And they consider the many reasons kids get angry, as well as how having a mental health condition can make it harder for a child to manage their emotions and reactions. As you read on, you'll find advice and strategies to help you react to your child's anger more calmly, as an angry child can trigger even the calmest parent. You'll also learn ways to help your child develop healthy coping responses, strategies to help de-escalate them when they do get angry, and how to decide when professional help is needed. The appendices contain other useful tools and resources.



Why do you
always yell
at me?

In chapter 1, I cover the nature of anger and why many kids have trouble expressing and managing anger. Chapter 2 takes a close look at the reasons kids get angry and will help you identify those reasons in your own child.



That's not fair!
She always gets
her way!

And in chapter 3, you'll learn about the effects anger has on children, parents, and families and examine how your family has been impacted. These three chapters are short, which I hope makes the information in them easy to digest. Together, they provide you with the background information you need to understand the rest of the book and put the strategies into practice.

In the spirit of putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others, chapters 4 and 5 look at how you affect your child's anger. You'll examine the various factors that impact your anger and the ways you cope with it and learn strategies for calmer parenting overall.

Chapters 6 and 7 delve into how you can help your child learn more effective ways to manage and express their anger. I share both preventive and in-the-moment strategies for dealing with this issue. Chapter 8 shares advice for when to seek professional help and the various types of therapy available to help kids with anger problems.

The book ends with three appendices that can be useful too: Appendix A outlines several mental health conditions that make it harder for kids to control their anger. If you or your child has a mental health condition (or if you suspect that this may be the case), reading through this piece can point you in the right direction to get help. Appendix B is a Parent Report Card. You can ask your child to grade you on how they think you are doing as a parent! This is usually a fun task for kids, and it can give you important information on how they perceive you as a parent. More on this in chapter 5. Appendix C provides additional outside resources if you are interested in seeking more help and support.

While you can skip around to chapters that are most relevant to your situation, I recommend that you read through the entire book, as the understanding of anger issues addressed in the early chapters is directly related to the parenting strategies and tools described in later chapters.

It Gets Better

It may help to remember that if you are struggling to manage your own angry reactions (a perfectly normal response to your child treating you disrespectfully), your child is likely having even more difficulty managing their anger. A child's brain is immature, and their ability to control their impulses is still developing. You have to be the "adult in the room" if you are going to help your child learn to express their anger constructively. This is easier said than done, and things won't always go smoothly. But it gets easier the more you try to adopt the more positive and gentle parenting strategies described in this book instead of just focusing on consequences and punishments (though they have their place). Seeing anger as a natural human reaction to frustration, rather than a disrespectful behavior to be eliminated, and anger management as a skill to be taught, can change your perspective and your reactions to your child's anger. And it makes parenting much more rewarding and less stressful.

Dealing with angry kids can be one of the biggest challenges for parents. The good news is that you have plenty of tools at your disposal that you can use to help your kid calm down, improve your relationship with them, and give them a better future.

CHAPTER 1: Understanding Anger

Malik is fifteen years old. He plays goalie on the hockey team. While he is a good player, he is very hard on himself and his teammates. If he lets a goal get past him, he will yell and bang his stick or shout at his teammates for not trying hard enough. Some of Malik's teammates have even complained about his reactions. Malik's coach has talked with him multiple times, but it hasn't helped, and Malik is in danger of being kicked off the team. Malik realizes he's overreacting, but he doesn't understand why and can't seem to stop himself.

In this chapter, I discuss the way the brain works when it's angry and how kids' brain development affects their ability to modulate their anger. I also cover the many factors that can affect a child's anger. If you can understand the difficulty kids naturally have in keeping their emotions in check (they're still just kids), it should become easier for you to remain calm when your child gets angry and to respond in ways that help them decompress, rather than making it worse by your reactions. This will probably not come naturally, but with practice, you'll find that it becomes much easier for you, and your child, to handle these situations constructively.

Anger Is a Normal, Healthy Emotion

All people get angry at times. In fact, anger is an essential emotion. It is part of the human survival instinct, triggering the fight, flight, or freeze response. When our brains sense danger or threats, anger can get our bodies pumped up and ready to fight the threat or run from it, both in the hopes that we will live. Of course, most people aren't being threatened in this way. Still, our bodies react to minor threats (and even annoyances) as if they are life-or-death situations. This is why it is so hard for some people to respond well when they are told to calm down or stop being

angry. Calming down too quickly when we sense danger isn't a smart idea from an evolutionary point of view. If we are in the wild and don't respond properly to threats, we are less likely to survive. Our bodies instinctively calm down only when we think the danger has passed. So, when you tell your child to calm down while they are upset, you are actually working against their survival instincts.

Anger also helps us be assertive and stand up for ourselves and others. If we feel someone is being mean, taking advantage, stealing, or treating us or others unjustly, anger can give us the courage to speak up, let the other person know how we are feeling, and get them to stop their hurtful actions. This is also a healthy and normal reaction.

But anger can also be overwhelming. It can be very stressful to our minds and bodies, and if left uncontrolled, it can put us at greater risk for various emotional and physical problems. Your job as a parent is to help your child learn to channel their anger in constructive, rather than destructive, ways. When kids are angry, it is often a sign that they need more love, more support, and more understanding to deal with a situation. Their coping strategies are overwhelmed, which is why they are melting down. Understanding how the brain processes anger can help you feel more empathetic toward your child (and yourself) when anger flares up. It can also help you learn to better control your own anger and teach your kid to do the same.

How Anger Works in the Brain

The cerebrum is the largest part of the human brain. It is composed of many lobes and structures that govern our thoughts, emotions, and physical processes and reactions. For the purposes of understanding anger, the most important parts of the cerebrum are the frontal lobes and the limbic system.

The frontal lobes are much larger in humans than in other animals. The prefrontal cortex in particular (the part of the brain closest to the forehead) is responsible for thinking, reasoning, planning, language, and attention. It is what distinguishes humans from other primates and animals.