

# Understanding teen boys' anger

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Let's be honest. We all get angry at times and that is because it is a normal human emotion — not bad, just normal.

When our precious sons and their mates begin crossing that long bridge to manhood, many can struggle more with anger. It is important to keep in mind that anger is not the problem — it is a symptom of a deeper problem or challenge. When we have a deeper understanding of the things that contribute to an escalation of anger, particularly spontaneous or irrational anger for our teen boys, we can better support them during this tumultuous, confusing time of their lives.

Given that any change triggers stress we need to be mindful that adolescence is a time of change on so many levels – physical, hormonal, cognitive, emotional, social and psychological. All teens experience heightened stress simply because of so much change!

The first thing to understand is that many of today's teen boys have still been conditioned deeply by the 'man box'. One of the key messages of the man box, is that real men don't show vulnerable feelings and anger is an acceptable emotion for men to express. Another key message that is closely linked to this is that men must remain stoic and strong and "take it on the chin".

Early adolescence sees a significant growth in the limbic brain, the emotional brain.

*The impact on both our teen girls and boys, is that they feel things even more intensely than they did before puberty. This partly explains both the spontaneity and volatility of the anger that can occur.*

Much of a teen's responses to their world and experiences are coming from the least developed part of the brain. The slowly developing pre-frontal lobe affects the ability of young adolescents to manage emotional states such as anger, frustration, fear, boredom, shame and feelings of worthlessness. Their way of thinking – if they are thinking at all – can often allow them to catastrophise rather than accurately assess the current situation. Self-talk especially of the inner critic also becomes louder once puberty has begun.

## **The teen brain and anger**

It takes the development of the pre-frontal lobe in an individual's brain for them to have the capacity to make a different, more mature choice, although their automatic impulsive response will always be the most likely first choice. Many of us will know that when confronted by a threatening situation – and often this can be a perceived threat not a real threat – the primitive brain tends to respond automatically in one of three ways:

1. Flight – wanting to run away.
2. Freeze – suppressing emotions.
3. Fight – physical or verbal conflict.

The amygdala, which is like the threat centre of the brain, is larger in boys and with the emotional intensity amped up, it's easy to see why irrational anger can be linked to this automatic impulse to protect one's survival. When you add the surges of testosterone that flood through our tween/teen boys you can understand how things can get really volatile really quickly.

In the adolescent journey the biological need to belong becomes stronger and one of the reasons for many seemingly irrational outbursts of anger from our teen boys, is the perception that their belonging (particularly but not always, with a male group of friends) is threatened.

This can happen easily over a poorly received attempt at banter, or when physical connection like a punch or a shove goes badly, or when someone laughs at you. The embarrassment that follows often turns quickly into anger.

One example of this which I saw when I was teaching was a Year 9 boy who was 'dacked' (had his shorts pulled down from behind) by a mate in the school quadrangle. The crushing shame for the boy turned quickly into aggression and full-blown violence. It had been meant as a joke.

I have seen this happen many times and for some teen boys rather than fight with anger, they swallow the anger and it builds an enormous resentment towards the perpetrator. Much later that can come out as an even stronger rage.

Many teen boys will have been struggling with the forced changes that have come from COVID-19. Being prevented from school, sport or the freedom to catch up with mates in real time has no-doubt seen some huge outbursts of frustration and anger. While this is totally understandable, it can be difficult for parents to know what to do.

When the synaptic pruning takes place in early adolescence, it often increases forgetfulness, poor organisation and an inability to manage moods. Many boys can struggle with remembering things even before the brain does its pruning! So, for a teen boy who forgets his orthodontic appointment, accidentally leaves his backpack on the bus and loses his football boots – again, he can feel that there is something wrong with him.

When this happens frequently and he seems to be endlessly getting into trouble for his forgetfulness and being disorganised, is it any wonder he is going to experience significant angry moments?

On top of that many boys lose the capacity to speak articulately and start the mumbling, “yep’, “nup’ or ‘dunno.’ This can trigger embarrassment for our boys especially when people make fun of it and well-meaning grown-ups tell them to open their mouths!

*It's not his mouth that is the problem, it is the brain pruning that is the problem  
and he doesn't even know that it has happened!*

Sleep debt is another contributor to the heightened tension in a teen boy's nervous system. Poor sleep especially, when it becomes chronic, is a major contributor towards an increase in anxiety, emotional outbursts, more aggressive behaviour and is a major factor in adolescent depression.

Hopefully by now you have a better understanding of how many of the adolescent changes (and I haven't even touched on the endless hunger, badly behaving penises and acne) are underneath why our teen boys often find their world frustrating and damn annoying.

## **How men and women process emotion differently**

Michael Gurian writes about how males and females tend to process emotion differently in the brain. Females tend to quickly shift emotions from the brain's limbic system to the word centres of the brain, which means they're able to verbalise very quickly when they are upset.

It is quite different for our boys and indeed many men. Gurian writes that males tend to move emotions very quickly from their brains into their bodies. So often boys at any age when they're really upset will kick or hit or shove or run away. They often need to physically discharge the excess cortisol and this needs to be respected and understood. This can partly explain the vigorous physicality that can occur when a boy becomes overwhelmed with anger.

As I write in my forthcoming book:

*“Emotions can also continue to exist within our nervous system long after an event that has triggered them. Anyone who has lost a loved one will know that grief and sadness, and sometimes anger, can last a very long time. Many boys are carrying deep shame from their early childhood that just keeps festering in their nervous system. Blocked, stuck or repressed emotions can stay buried in our nervous system and sometimes this can be problematic for individuals in adolescence and adulthood.” — Maggie Dent, From Boys to Men (2020)*

Sadly, there is a lot of anger in adolescence especially for those boys who have been conditioned to perceive that anger is OK – and feeling sad or frightened is not. Many boys damage relationships with explosive angry outbursts and many struggle to repair those relationships. Often, following such outbursts our teen boys then have a tendency to attack themselves, inwardly. This creates even more emotional tension and angst that increases the likelihood of a teen boy reaching his tipping point even sooner.

Feeling like a failure or feeling excluded triggers big, ugly feelings that can often drown a boy, and often he responds by becoming angry and then he expresses that through aggression. The increasing numbers of boys being suspended and expelled in our high schools is problematic.

Over the many years I have worked with teen boys, I have noticed that some anger is a cover for significant anxiety and their way of managing heightened levels of stress. For other teen boys, anger has definitely covered deep grief, loneliness and a damaged sense of pride. Anger can hide and mask so many things, which is why it needs to be seen as a symptom rather than the core problem.

## **Toddlers on steroids**

Toddlers are well-known for their tantrums and meltdowns and it is well-accepted that these are developmentally appropriate. In a way, we need to reframe how we see teen boys' anger because it is also developmentally appropriate given the unique changes that are happening for them on so many levels.

In a way, teens can be seen as toddlers on steroids because they are bigger and louder!

*It is important to remember that no matter how nonsensical and frustrating our teen's feelings may seem to us, they are real and important to our teen and discharging emotions safely, especially anger, can be helpful to our teen boys.*

Shutting it down and making it wrong can simply make it worse later. Even worse is when parents get angry at their teen boys being angry!

Many parents want their teen son to stop being angry because they see the anger as the problem. The parent does not understand that anger is a response, and is often a reaction to feeling rejected, disappointed, confused, scared, unloved, misunderstood, disconnected, full of grief, sad, ugly, embarrassed, ashamed, useless, powerless or out of control.

We need to keep in mind that most boys have been conditioned to believe that anger is an acceptable warrior emotion – it is a 'manly emotion'.

So, keep in mind the metaphor of an iceberg – and know that under the anger you may be witnessing – will be so many other emotions plus anxiety.

## **Helping our teen boys manage their anger**

There is no question that the most significant balm for our tween/teen boys is knowing they are loved, valued and respected by the people who matter most to them.

Relationships – especially ones that can hold a place of unconditional love for our boys, during this incredibly emotionally volatile window of their lives – are the secret to helping them feel safe in their confusing world. This window does not last forever, just a few years, however it can seem like a very long time.

It can be helpful to have a conversation with a teen boy about what can work for him in defusing anger when he is not angry or upset. Never try to talk to him when he is dysregulated!

*We need to talk to our tween and teen boys about strategies to safely physically discharge enormous emotional distress.*

To be honest any significant physical activity, especially if it gets their heart rate up quite high, will help them stay calmer throughout the day.

Today's teen boys living in this digital world have much higher levels of passivity than previous generations of teen boys. Indeed, some gaming behaviour is quite obviously increasing our boys' emotional intensity and anger, especially when their parents want to implement more healthy boundaries around their digital world! Techno tantrums for teen boys is a relatively new phenomenon.

### **Here are a few ideas and activities for your son to manage anger and process excess cortisol:**

- using a boxing bag at home
- running, climbing, skating, swimming, surfing, sport
- taking a walk in nature, fishing
- spending time with the family dog
- listening to or playing music
- cooking
- hanging out with friends
- practising mindfulness (there are so many great apps to help!)
- learning some breathing exercises, such as the 4-2-4 breathing pattern
- spending alone time in their bedrooms without being interrupted.

NB: Just jumping into gaming will distract a tween/teen boy BUT his energy is likely to escalate and he could reach his tipping point even quicker very soon after – often over something tiny.

### **Frustration is not anger**

We need to help our boys understand that feeling frustrated or upset because you can't do what you want, or have something you desire is normal. Often boys feel frustrated when they feel misunderstood. Sometimes they get frustrated when a task they've set themselves is harder than they originally thought. Or perhaps they have not been given an opportunity to do something the way they want – so they feel a lack of autonomy and independence. Frustration can quickly become anger and we need to help boys work out how to manage these big ugly emotions without hurting themselves, others or the world around them.

When they do make a poor choice, rather than correcting them through shouting, shaming or punishing our boys, we can break the cycle of just further fuelling more shame and anger by instead guiding them through loving connection, quiet coaching and teaching them accountability. Again, it's important for any coaching and talk of consequences to be done AFTER everything has calmed down.

If your teen boys' anger becomes a real worry or you have concerns that his moods may be beyond the normal ups and downs of adolescence, please consider seeking support.

Hopefully by now you may have a better understanding of some of the things that contribute to our boys and the inability to manage their anger. It can be really helpful for them to understand the unique changes that are happening to them as well. Many times, when I was working with adolescents there was a palpable sense of relief when a room full of teen boys realised that many of the things that were contributing to their confusion, were things they had little control over and they were happening to all their mates as well.

Try not to take your son's anger personally as it is more about him than you. Please find some compassion for young, often confused lads as they certainly need it during especially the early part of crossing that long bridge to manhood.