What if They Get Angry When I Say No?

You can stay calm and step away if things get too heated.

We have all been in situations when another person's anger made us want to change our answer just to end the tension. This may also have happened as parents when our young children had temper tantrums in a store when told "no" to something they wanted. Did we stick with our answer even though it got uncomfortable – or did we give in to get them to quiet down.

Anger can be hard to tolerate, especially if shouting or conflict has felt frightening in the past. Your heart may race, your mind may go blank, or you may rush to end the argument. Acknowledge the feeling without agreeing to the demand. "I can see you're frustrated" is different from "Okay, okay, I'll give you the money." Keep your voice as steady as you can and use a short sentence. Avoid sarcasm, threats, or telling your child to "calm down." If you have already explained the limit, more explaining may only keep the argument going.

Stepping away works best when you tell them you are doing this and can do so safely. You might say, "I'm leaving the room now to take a break. We can try again after dinner if we're both ready." On the phone, you can calmly end the call and offer to reconnect later. If texting, you can stop replying to repeated demands after stating your answer. Taking a break allows both people to calm down a bit. It's not the same as punishing your child by giving them the silent treatment.

After things settle, you can reconnect without reopening the same debate. "Yesterday was hard. I want us to be able to talk without shouting." If you raised your voice, you can take responsibility for that while keeping a reasonable limit.

Anger and danger are not the same thing, so pay attention to threats, blocked exits, broken objects, weapons, or fear that someone may get hurt. Do not keep repeating a limit to prove you can hold it when the situation is unsafe. Move away from danger towards safety if you can and seek emergency help if things escalate to a dangerous level. Take all threats of self-harm or harm to others seriously and call for help. Even if they say afterwards that they really didn't mean it, it teaches them that you will take all threats of harm seriously every time and it may deter them from continuing with the behavior.

Situation

You tell your child you will not give them money. They raise their voice and accuse you of abandoning them.

Instead of

Child: "You're unbelievable. You never help me when I need it."

You: "That's not true. I do everything for you!"

Child: "Then give me the money unless you want me to end up on the street!"

You: “Stop yelling at me!”

Child: “Fine! Forget it but don’t try to talk to me!”

In this version, both of you get pulled into the argument. The original limit gets buried under defending, proving, and reacting.

Try this

Child: “You’re unbelievable. You never help me when I need it!”

You: “I can hear that you’re angry.”

Child: “Then give me the money!”

You: “My answer is still no.”

Child: “You obviously don’t care about me.”

You: “I love you and I do care. I’m going to step away now because this is getting too heated for me. We can talk later when things are calmer.”

In this version, you acknowledge the feeling without debating the limit. Stepping away can protect both the relationship and your ability to stay steady.

Think about it

1. What happens inside you when your child gets angry at a limit you set?
2. What words could help you end a heated conversation without changing your decision?

References:

Partnership to End Addiction. (2024). *The Partnership Model: A guide for peer parent coaches and families supporting a loved one with substance use challenges.*

Visit our Family Resource Center: [Family Resource Center - Partnership to End Addiction]