



Down Syndrome NSW

## *How can someone with little or no speech express anger appropriately?*

This reasonably common, and very sensible question was posed recently on an international email list for parents of people with Down syndrome. The answers were empathetic, creative and very practical. We thank the participants in the discussion, who have all agreed to share their insights.

### ***Susan posed the question:***

*Sam is 7 1/2, severely speech delayed (probably apraxia, testing this summer) and has always been a bit behavior-challenged on top of a rather fiery personality. But his way of showing anger has gotten much more physically aggressive in the last year, with a lot of kicking, stomping, and hitting, plus screaming and tantrums.*

*But when a child has very little speech, and has to think clearly to use what he has-- what is an appropriate way for him to express anger? If he can't explain why something is upsetting him, he has to let it out somehow. Any thoughts? He not only kicks people, but things like glass and storm doors, the dog, breakable toys - I'm not sure if teaching him to kick or hit an object is a good idea or not.*

*Sam's getting a tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy next week for sleep apnea - we're hoping that resolves some of it, but I think the behaviors are pretty entrenched at this point.*

### ***And list members replied:***

Does he use any signs or picture communication? My Elliot is verbal but still acts out when angry or frustrated and we are trying to encourage him to use pictures to express how he's feeling and/or what he wants. Also sitting down with him and encouraging him to take a couple deep breaths before things escalate. Sometimes prompting him with, "I'm mad because ...."

I seem to remember reading somewhere that it's not a good idea to teach kids to hit or kick an object when upset. Maybe some other physical outlet---running around the yard, jumping up & down, swinging?

*My 9 year old son Benjamin is also verbal, but has difficulty communicating when he is angry - and sometimes his feelings are more complicated than he is able to communicate.*

*My techniques are to remind him to Calm Down (which he uses on me when I get upset) and to take deep breaths - sometimes that gives him the extra time he needs to process his feelings and relate them*

*I usually can tell when he is upset and when I see things escalating, I offer one of his favorite things - we have been outside on the swing at 11pm to help him calm down sometimes - (luckily, I live in Florida, where that is possible).*

Maybe an emotion board with picture representations of the more likely emotions, including anger, that he can point to instead of kicking? An extension might be a second board with pictures of things he can do to calm down and get back in control. (Put it on the wall or somewhere he can easily go to in times of stress.) There is a great poster which can be found in most (educational supplies) stores which has real-life photos of emotions on children's faces. We found it a great teaching tool in helping Erick identify how he felt at various times.

*About two years ago I heard a psychologist who specializes in seeing people with intellectual disabilities speak about her work with young men with disabilities who experienced problems expressing emotions appropriately, especially anger. Some of them (including at least one with DS)*

*had not developed concepts and language about emotions sufficiently to be able to distinguish between some emotions.*

*The example I remember best was a young man who was not able to distinguish between sadness and anger, and his response was the same when he felt either – aggression, which of course caused a lot of trouble for him and those around him, and limited his opportunities. It really brought home to me the necessity of teaching much more than just speech.*

*My 17 yr old son speaks well, but still sometimes experiences difficulty in really getting his head around the difference between feeling angry and acting aggressively. As others have said, teaching him to take a few deep breaths, and reminding himself to “calm down”, “keep cool” and to walk away has given him both useful strategies, and the confidence to know that he can be in control of his behaviour, even when he feels angry about something.*

*Elizabeth Crary’s books on feelings (a whole range, not just anger) are really useful for both children and adults, giving ideas and options for responding to emotions. They’re not written especially for/about people with disabilities, but are excellent for all:*

*<http://www.parentingpress.com>*

### **From Carrie Olson, a speech and language pathologist, and mother of Abby 5, who is diagnosed with Childhood Apraxia of Speech\*:**

Here's a few ideas that might help Sam when he's angry:

Teach him the sign for "mad" along with either a guttural growl or low mad "mmmmm" sound to go with it. Use the word "mad", but also growl or do the "mmmm". If he doesn't imitate the vocalization part, that's fine, but I would continue to do it whenever you sign it. It would be best to do this with him frequently when he's not mad. Show him pictures of people that are mad, look at books that have things happening that might make someone mad, identify other people at home or at school that are "mad" (they should be doing this at school too). I would do other emotions too - at least happy and sad, so you're not only concentrating on mad. Once you've done this quite a bit, then help him identify his own feelings as "mad" at a time when he is mad. Help him to growl or "mmmm" by imitating you and doing the sign. Make mad faces together in the mirror. Have stuffed animals make mad faces and growl or "mmmm".

Another thing that might help is to hang a Stop! sign up at home and at school. Help him to "Stop" - use the sign for stop too - then take a deep breath - or "stop" and show you "mad" with the sign and vocalizations (if he can).

If the signing is too difficult, someone's idea of pictures of different emotions was good. Again, I would put them up at home and at school. You could even do this along with the signing and growling. I know for me a good low growl now and then helps me to laugh at myself!

Like you, I've never been comfortable with the idea of having a child hit something such as a punching bag or special pillow. It still seems too much like teaching them violence is okay. The "stop" sign idea worked very well for some students I had in my Severe Speech and Language Impaired classroom ( many years ago!)

Jim Gill is a musician/social worker that works with groups of children (some with special needs) and "plays" with music. He has some great recordings that are very language rich (emotions, basic concepts, and so on). One in particular is a song about mad, sad and glad---he and the kids growl, cry and laugh on the song. They're great fun and wonderful music, relatively inexpensive too. Available at: [www.jimgill.com](http://www.jimgill.com)

The one that has the "I'm so mad..." song is "Jim Gill Sings the Sneezing Song and Other Contagious Tunes" I highly recommend any of his music! Abby and I have spent lots of time dancing and singing to his songs! Excellent way of teaching many basic concepts. Also, most of it is sung slow enough for our kids to participate well - he includes lots of short pauses.

Good luck!

*I like the guttural growl idea. That's what I do with Maddie (9, who has DS and autism) My oldest son (now 21 and does not have a disability) used to have an issue with anger management. I taught him how to count until he can calm himself. That has always worked for me and my husband. Anger is just as important as other emotions and it's important to let it out, albeit in an appropriate manner. I think the thing that all of us need most when we are angry is validation. Our kids are no different.*

*We are having difficulty now with Maddie and her \*anger\* emotion. Right now, she will somersault like crazy, or worse, head bang. This is the main reason we are considering medication.*

*She doesn't have a method of communication, has no verbal language (receptively as well) and because of her autism, she doesn't \*get\* the pictures of people mad, or sad. Even when we show our own anger or sadness, it has no effect. However, I'll continue to use the growl sound ..... hoping eventually it will catch on.*

**And from Joan Medlen, editor of *Disability Solutions*,\*\* and mother to a young man who has Down syndrome and autism:**

*When Andy was around 6 1/2, during what would later be known as "the hell years" when his regression and aggression were at their height, we had to find a way for him to express the intensity of what he felt in a different way.*

*First, I chose the path of "ignorance" or "non-response" to extreme displays of anger and frustration. This meant that when he bit me, I did not punish - I recognized there was a bigger issue at hand - nor did I react. Not reacting was the hardest part. Often I would calmly deal with the situation, wait until there was some sort of resolution, leave the room nonchalantly, and then, when out of sight, burst into tears. Of all the things I've done as a parent, this was the most difficult I've encountered.*

*As we began to understand what some of his messages were, we set up some voice output devices to express them. One said, "It's MY turn!!" in a typical kid whiny/angry voice. Another said, "what do you MEAN it's Ryan's turn?!?"*

*Our goal, of course, was for Andy to use the device. Well, we began by pushing it ourselves. When he would become upset that his brother was going to play Nintendo on our ONE TV, I would push the button complaining about Ryan getting a turn - just as he was starting to get upset. And then I explained to him when Ryan was done, he would have a turn. So when his turn came - no matter when it was - we pushed "it's MY turn!" We found that it made a tremendous difference in his intense "explosions" to have this ability to whine and protest, just like any other little brother.*

*Another first message he adored was, "Get in here NOW! I need you!"*

*As you can tell, we don't worry about manners and perfect communication when teaching a message. I found it much more important to give him the actual emotion in "kid speak" than to record an unrealistic adult message on the device such as "Would someone please help me?" or "please leave me alone."*

*Now, with all the great goodies out there, this would be an inexpensive and easy thing to pull together. Get those little 2 inch square photo frames and you can record various protests. Put a velcro dot on the "play button" and the other side of the dot on the lid so it closes. You have a single switch! Just push.*

*Also, I would invest in a visual timer. ([www.do2learn.com](http://www.do2learn.com)) that helps kids SEE when the time is up for something - be it a time out, their turn, or when dinner's coming.*

*I know this doesn't work for everyone, but it's another way of diffusing the intensity your child feels - especially when speech is very, very hard.*

*Even with his autism, Andy is very good at identifying his feelings and emotions of others or characters in a book. This drives everyone nuts because emotions and social skills are not typically an area of strength for children with autism-only.*

*Good luck!*

\* *Lessons by Abigail: Educating a Seasoned Speech-Language Pathologist*  
Named "Mom" Carrie Olson, M.A., CCC-SLP, *Disability Solutions* Volume 5, Issue 3, Jan-Feb 2003  
(Download from [www.disabilitysolutions.org](http://www.disabilitysolutions.org) )

\*\* Joan also suggests revisiting *Practical Approaches to Behaviors that Drive You Crazy (Also Known As "Challenging Behaviors")* by Paul White, M.A., *Disability Solutions*, Volume 4, Issue 1  
November/December 1999

---

**DS NSW library resources available for borrowing by members:**

*All of these titles are published by Parenting Press: [www.parentingpress.com](http://www.parentingpress.com)  
They are written for and about typically developing children, but contain a lot of useful ideas for all children.*

**When You're Mad and You know It** , Elizabeth Crary,  
*a board book for very young children*

**I'm Mad; I'm Frustrated; I'm Furious**, all by Elizabeth Crary,  
*feature clear line drawings of facial expressions, and pose alternative ways of resolving situations that lead to anger and aggression.*

**What is a Feeling?** by David W. Krueger

**All My Feelings at Home**, by Susan Conlin and Susan Levine Friedman

**All My Feelings at Preschool**, by Susan Conlin and Susan Levine Friedman

**Dealing with Disappointment: helping kids cope when things don't go their way**,  
by Elizabeth Crary

**Feeling Elf Cards and Games (playing card deck and games sheet)** by Elizabeth Crary and Peaco Todd

**Learning to Listen**, by Herb Lovett, Paul Brookes Publishing Company, 1997  
*discusses very challenging behaviours with particular attention to the point of view of the person with the behaviour, and its possible long term causes.*

***Some websites with useful resources on challenging behaviour:***

**Imagine:** [www.dimagine.com/](http://www.dimagine.com/)

**The Beach Centre:** <http://beachcenter.org/> (look for fact Sheets and Newsletters)

For access to the email list **Down Syndrome Listserv**, see:  
<http://listserv.nodak.edu/archives/down-syn.html>