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Calming Angry Kids

Guest: Tricia Goyer, Ron Deal
From the series: Calming Angry Kids (Day 1 of 1)
Air date: December 6, 2019

Bob: As a parent, have you found yourself trying to deal logically and thoughtfully with children who are in the middle of a meltdown? Tricia Goyer says that typically isn't going to work.

Tricia: When kids are emotional, they're thinking brain is turned off. So, I would be trying to explain the right way to act and—"We shouldn't act this way." It's not even getting through at all. They would be trying to go to their room, go into separate—and I would be like following them: "You need to respect me. We need to talk about this." And then realizing, they do need time to calm down.

Afterwards, we can talk about it. I think so many times, we want to solve it in the moment. Sometimes, it would be the next day where I felt like we could talk about what happened yesterday. We didn't need to solve everything, even that day; but we can put it off when we're both in a better state of mind to talk about what happened.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. How can we calm angry kids? Is there anything we can do in the middle of the meltdown? Ron Deal talks with Tricia Goyer about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. Looking back at the last year here at FamilyLife, one of the things that we've been really excited about is the launch of the FamilyLife podcast network. I mention that because we're going to hear an excerpt today from Ron Deal's *FamilyLife Blended* podcast. Ron Deal. Ron was talking with author, Tricia Goyer, who has written a book called *Calming Angry Kids*. Tricia grew up in a blended family. She and her husband John have adopted seven kids. They've got ten total.

Dave: Wow.

Bob: She and Ron had a conversation about what you do when your kids get angry.

[Audio from *FamilyLife Blended* podcast]

Tricia: All of us get angry, and I think one of the things—especially if we are dealing with a child who is being disobedient or angry—one of the things that I've learned since

then is that those responses will happen. Like, our heart will start pounding. Our fist will tense up, and we'll feel the anger. Like, our body is made to respond that way; but we don't have to express it. We can send up a prayer. We can take a deep breath. We can open our fist. We don't have to express our anger.

I never thought I had an anger problem. I was always like the really chill mom until I had these angry kids in my face. Then I found my voice raising and my—"You get back here!" It was that—I learned that, like, I don't have to express anger myself. I don't have to yell at them. I can act in a calm way. When I act in a calm way, then I can model for them what it looks like to be angry and to respond in calmness.

Ron: I really appreciate it. In your book, you talk about that. It came full circle. You found yourself, as an adult, beginning to have some anger problems. You never thought you'd be there; but all of the sudden, all this stuff was modeled for you that you saw just kind of came out of you. I think that is pretty common. I guess what I hear you saying is: "Yes; it happens, and we are responsible to try to learn how not to respond that way."

Tricia: Absolutely. I think before with my biological kids, we raised them. We had a loving home. We weren't angry. They didn't respond in anger. So, I never had to be tested in that area until I had someone in my face, pushing all my buttons—

Ron: Yes.

Tricia: —you know? Then it's like—all of the sudden, it was like—"Okay; this is the real test. This is: How do I respond to this teenager when she turns and says, 'Whatever,' or 'I'm running away,' or"—you know all these types of things. It's like—"I can't control them with my body / physically. I can't control them with my words. I can't talk her into obeying. So, I found my voice raising and raising and raising." Then I realized that doesn't control them either.

Ron: That's good. So, pushed your buttons—I heard you say that. What kind of buttons was that for you?

Tricia: Oh, they would—they would say stuff like—"You love your other kids more," or "You just adopting us to get attention." I'm like—really—I wouldn't be going into all this just to get attention or—"You just want to write a book about us." I'm like—"Eventually, I probably will write a book about you."

Ron: At least you're honest.

Tricia: Yes. [Laughter]

Ron: But yes; that's not the sole purpose. By the way, those little guilt trips that kids throw us, those are pretty common; right?

Tricia: They are.

Ron: I think there is some real parallels here. Yes; I know your situation. For our listener, Tricia's situation is adopted kids; but it can be similar with biological kids / your own children and stepchildren. Sometimes, they don't always perceive well our motivations; and here they were accusing you of having selfish motivations. You're going—"No; no; no; I'm pure in heart. I don't know why you can't see that." But that hit your buttons, and that would set you off. You would find yourself getting angry.

Tricia: I think with them, they had so many people in their past who said, "I love you. I'm not going to abandon you." They had a failed adoption right before us, and their biological parents who said, "I promise I'll get better. I'm going to come back. You're going to come home with me." So, for me to say, "I promise you're in our forever family. We're never going to hurt you," it's like they've heard this a hundred times—

Ron: Wow.

Tricia: —from all these different people. Suddenly—and I really, looking back now, we've gone to therapy which has been wonderful for all of us. They were just wanting to be bad enough so that we would finally let them go back to foster care so they didn't have to put down that wall. I think that wall was around their hearts, and they were afraid to lower the wall. They were afraid to be vulnerable. They were afraid to let us in. So, they are just going to push and push and push to push us out of the way so we'd send them back.

Ron: Yes. You know, man, that is so important because, I think, all of us struggle with—"Is God going to send me away? I've sinned again. He's got to be getting tired of this." I mean I've had those thoughts. I don't know about you; but I think it's fairly easy for us to have that same sort of fear about even how we relate to God. Of course, they would assume that: "Everyone else sends me away. This is the story of my life. You're going to do the same thing."

Tricia: Yes; that's so good. I think, even after our adopted kids, I was still like trying to keep the house perfectly clean and having well-behaved kids. They'd act out some place. I didn't want to explain myself because I didn't want to look like a bad mom. I remember one evening in the laundry room just being so overwhelmed because we've added seven kids. I mean that's a lot of laundry. That's a lot, a lot of work.

Ron: Wow.

Tricia: And just being like—"I can't keep up." I felt like God like His still, small voice saying, "I love you just as much as if you have a pile of laundry, as if you kept this house perfectly clean." I'm like—"Okay." It was almost like that continual reminder to me—like—I don't have to perform. I don't have to be perfect. Even with these kids, I'm going to mess up, and I have messed up; but God still loves me.

Ron: Isn't that ironic that you're kind of having the same thoughts about God and your relationship that they are having with you—

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: —and their relationship with you?

Tricia: And I'll share that with them, like—"I have these feelings too, and I want to perform. This is what I've had God telling me." It's—I think, especially with the older girls, I'm able to have those conversations with them more and more. They are able to talk to me about—"I had a really bad dream last night that you and Daddy dropped us off at the DHS office." I mean they are still struggling with that, but we have at least those conversations now where we can talk about that.

Ron: Wait a minute because I think there's a real tool in there. You get vulnerable about your fears, concerns, worries, stuff going on between you and God as a way of articulating to them—what?—"Hey; Mom's not perfect either"?

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: That opens them up to be vulnerable with you and their fears and concerns even as it relates to you. It's easy to talk about my fear as it relates to somebody else not in the room; but Mom, this is about you and me. They are even sharing those with you.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: That's powerful because you are using that fear and that concern as a tool to move you closer to the heart of your child and to show them that they are safe to do the same with you. I've got to tell you, "That is awesome."

Tricia: Yes; and I think the more I apologize / the more I explain my own worries and fears, then it is—it is just giving them a welcome mat to do the same with me. It usually that conversation will usually continue with them sharing something they are struggling with.

Ron: I will throw in a caveat for the blended family couples listening right now. Try this. I think in general it's a good strategy. You be vulnerable first. It kind of helps kids later be vulnerable with you. They may not do it immediately. It may take them quite a bit of time depending on how big their walls are and how thick they are; but at least, it moves them in that direction. There are exceptions though. I think a stepparent could try that and discover that it backfires for whatever reason / that a child uses it against you. Share something to the other household for example and tries to create difficulty.

So, please hear that with a try it and see kind of suggestion along with it; but I think in

general, the principle is really true. When we go first, it makes it easier for them to follow.

[Studio]

Bob: Well, we've been listening to an excerpt from Ron Deal's *FamilyLife Blended* podcast about how to respond as parents when kids get angry. Any of your kids get angry? Did they have—

Dave: Never, Bob.

Bob: —tantrums?

Dave: Our kids were perfect; yes.

Bob: Sat at the table with their arms folded?

Dave: Oh, yes. There was plenty of anger.

Ann: I think I was worse than the kids just because moms are tired. We're not getting much sleep; but yes; I think every family has kids that get angry. Don't they?

Bob: We had kids that would get frustrated about things in life—

Ann: Right.

Bob: —and who would—

Dave: Sure.

Bob: —express their anger / their frustration. When you got angry, did you double back with the kids and say, "Mom blew it here"?

Ann: Yes; and I would be in bed at night kicking myself.

Dave: Speaking of kicking, Bob, she kicked a hole in the wall one day.

Ann: I was frustrated. We were doing homework, and I have a son that has ADD. We had gone over the same spelling word 50 times, and he was like not paying attention.

Dave: Sounds like an excuse for getting angry.

Ann: So, I was so angry. I just kind of clinched my fist like—"Come on!" I kicked the wall, and my foot went through the wall. I was tempted to say, "Don't tell Dave. Don't tell Dad"; but I didn't. But I did go up and get some wallpaper, and I covered that hole. The

second he walked back into the house, the kids all ran to Dave and said, “Dad, we had no idea how strong Mom was!” Yes; that was one of those nights that I was lying in bed kicking myself and being so upset. Yes; I think it’s really important to go back and apologize.

Bob: Ron and Tricia, in this podcast, had a chance to talk about how you can start to understand what’s behind your kid’s anger; and when you get to the heart of it, that helps you defuse what’s going on. In fact, let’s listen to their conversation about that.

[Audio from *FamilyLife Blended* podcast]

Ron: So, in your book, *Calming Angry Kids*, on a bad night, you write in your journal, “I am hurt by my daughter’s rejection. I give so much; and to have it rejected hurts. I feel abandoned and not good enough”—this is you talking—“I can’t fix this. I can’t fix her. I worry about the other kids. I want to be loved by her, and I want to love her. I’m tired of being hurt. I feel angry to sacrifice so much; and instead of gratitude, I get defiance and rejection in return.” That’s real. That’s raw.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: Then after beginning to try to see her through God’s eyes, your heart softened; and you wrote this. I don’t know how much time has taken place between these two; but what a contrast. You write this: “She is afraid of being hurt. She’s given so much to others, and her heart is battered. She has been abandoned. She’s been told she’s not good enough. She couldn’t fix anything about her family or where she lived. She wants to love me and be loved by me; but she’s afraid. No matter what she gets she’s scared it will be taken away. She wants to reject me before she is rejected.”

Talk about what happened in you between A and B.

Tricia: A lot of crying. [Laughter] It was like four o’clock in the morning, sitting on the couch, feeling like—“I don’t know what to do here. I don’t know what to do with her. I don’t know how I’m going to deal with the day.” I mean every day was conflict. Every day was some type of getting rejected, some kind of her saying something to me. So, really, it was just pouring out to God. Then it was just sitting there with my Bible asking Him to change me / to change me to be able to love her.

It was probably a couple hours’ time of crying and praying. Then I started looking at what I was saying through how God saw her as this little girl. I mean she was five years old when she was first put into foster care. She was 11 years old when we first met her. That’s a lot of years—

Ron: It is.

Tricia: —and a lot of rejection—and even with her biological parents, a lot of rejection as a little girl.

Ron: Wow. So, that heart shift took place for you, and I think that probably set the tone for you, then, to learn some practical things about managing your anger and responding to kids about their anger. So, let's just get practical for a minute; okay?

Tricia: Okay.

Ron: Here are some things that you feel like you had to learn. You talk about understand the brain and strong emotional reactions and then dealing with your own anger and trying to manage how you respond in calming down as being a vital part of that. Do you mind just talking around those real quick?

Tricia: Yes; absolutely. Well, when—one thing a therapist told me, when kids are emotional, they are thinking brain is turned off. So, I would be trying to explain the right way to act and—"We shouldn't act this way. This is how you're making me feel"—which is not even getting through at all. So, realizing, I need to give them time to calm down. They would be trying to go to their room / go into separate—I'd be like following—"No; you need to respect me. We need to talk about this." Realizing, they do need time to calm down; and afterwards, we could talk about it.

I think so many times, we want to solve it in the moment. Sometimes, it would be the next day where I felt like we had a good enough relationship where we could talk about what happened yesterday. We didn't need to solve everything, even that day, but we can put it off when we are both in a better state of mind to talk about what happened.

Ron: You talked about a couple other practical things: changing your thoughts about them, confessing your own inadequacies, and not taking the bait.

Tricia: Absolutely. I think one of the things about not taking the bait is when I get emotional / when I am angry, suddenly, it's not about them. It's about me. So, they might be doing something wrong. They might have just hit their sibling, and I'm trying to discipline them. They are angry. If I get angry, then, suddenly, it's like—"You're mean. You are yelling at me." Then, suddenly, it's not about them and their issue. It's about me, and then I have to go apologize later. Again, it's not about their issue. So, really, the therapist said, "When you stay calm, you win."

Ron: One of the other things you write about is ignoring the behavior; okay? I'm just going to throw in an objection and play devil's advocate right on the outset of this.

Okay; wait a minute. When they get out of line / acting disrespectful / they are calling me names—whatever it is that they are doing—anger outbursts, hurt siblings, taking it out on somebody, "It's unfair," taking it out on me—whatever that is—I've heard a lot of stepdads go—"I can take a little disrespect, but when my stepchild starts disrespecting

their mother, that's when I'm like totally getting up in their face." How do you ignore the behavior when it rises up something strong within you?

Tricia: Well, we have a story that goes with this. So, we had one child in particular that every night at bedtime, she would bring something up. She would act out. It was like all the other kids were going to bed; and we'd spend the next hour dealing with this child / dealing with what she just said, dealing with how she acted. So, ended up talking to the therapist, and they were saying, "Well, she's getting a lot of individual attention from both you and your husband every night. She gets a whole hour of your time as you sit down and deal with this with her."

So, the therapist said, "When she acts out, whatever it is, completely ignore it." So, John and I were in the kitchen. You could see into the living room into the kitchen. She starts acting up, and I don't even remember what—it would be the littlest things that she would get angry about, and we'd have to deal with. So, that night, we just sat talking to each other pretending like she wasn't even there. So, pretty soon, she's not getting attention. We're talking about—"Oh, what should we do for dinner tomorrow? How was your day at work?"—just talking to each other.

So, then she goes and gets a lighter and starts lighting all the candles in the house. She's like—"Oh, what if I drop this? The house will catch on fire. Can you get the other kids out?" We're completely pretending like it's not happening. So, then she realizes that's not working. She goes—and I had just gotten a bunch of homeschool books in / a whole box of brand-new books. I hear rip, rip. My heart is pounding in my chest. I'm like—I tell my husband, "I can't do this. I cannot do this."

Ron: She's escalating her—

Tricia: She is escalating her behavior.

Ron: Trying to pull you in.

Tricia: Trying to pull me in. So, finally, we're just like—"Well, we're going to bed." We just leave her—don't even look into the room where she's at. She's in the dining room at this point. Go to bed, and we're on the other side of the room just like listening to see what's going.

Ron: Panic. Do we call the police now?

Tricia: Right.

Ron: Or the fire department?

Tricia: After a couple of minutes, we hear her stomping upstairs because that didn't work either. The next day, I went in. She had been actually ripping up binder paper. She

hadn't actually ripped up the homeschool books; but she made it sound like it. She's like—"Oh, science book"—rip, rip. She never did that again.

The next night, when it was time to go to bed, she went up to bed. At first, I was like—it totally—I don't know if would work every time. But for that situation, she was getting so much attention from us at bedtime for acting out; when we finally didn't give her that attention, then she's like—"Okay; that didn't work." She just went to bed.

Ron: One of the things that couple along with this, if you're listening and you're going—"All right; really. I need to give that a try." As soon as you can compliment something / as soon as you can move in with attention around something that is going well—and sometimes, it's just the absence of a negative—

Tricia: Right.

Ron: You know, it's like—"You know I noticed you didn't pick on your sister tonight before bedtime. What's that all about? That's pretty cool. Thank you for doing that." So, you're combining the not-attention for the negative with now something good for something in the right direction. No foolproof solution in any parenting strategy with any one kid; all right? Let me just throw that disclaimer out to our listeners; but it's worth a shot. That's a really good one.

Tricia: It's amazing as soon as you start complimenting one kid, the other kids are like—"What can I do?"

Ron: I know.

Tricia: "I'm going to go get my pajamas on too. I'm going to brush my teeth too." They are like all running to get that compliment. I'm like—"Wow! Our words are powerful."

[Studio]

Bob: Well, again we've been listening to a conversation Ron Deal had with author Tricia Goyer who has written a book called *Calming Angry Kids*. It's part of the *FamilyLife Blended* series of podcasts; and you can hear the entire conversation with Ron and Tricia when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com and download it.

One of the things they talk about—Tricia later in life had an opportunity to meet, for the first time, her biological father; and she talked with Ron about the excitement of that and then the letdown that happened which is sometimes the case in those situations. Again, you can download the entire podcast when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com. I thought what they were saying there about positive reinforcement is really important. It's not just that as parents, we are always correcting our kids when they do it wrong but cheering them on when they get something right. That's powerful; isn't it?

Dave: It is so easy to find them doing some wrong. You've got to work at it—you know?—to find them doing something right and cheerleading / applauding.

Ann: I think it really takes prayer and asking God to point out and show us the things that they are doing well and right and then to get into a habit pattern of doing that and seeing it.

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