

# Anger Management: Emotional Outbursts and Teenage Defiance

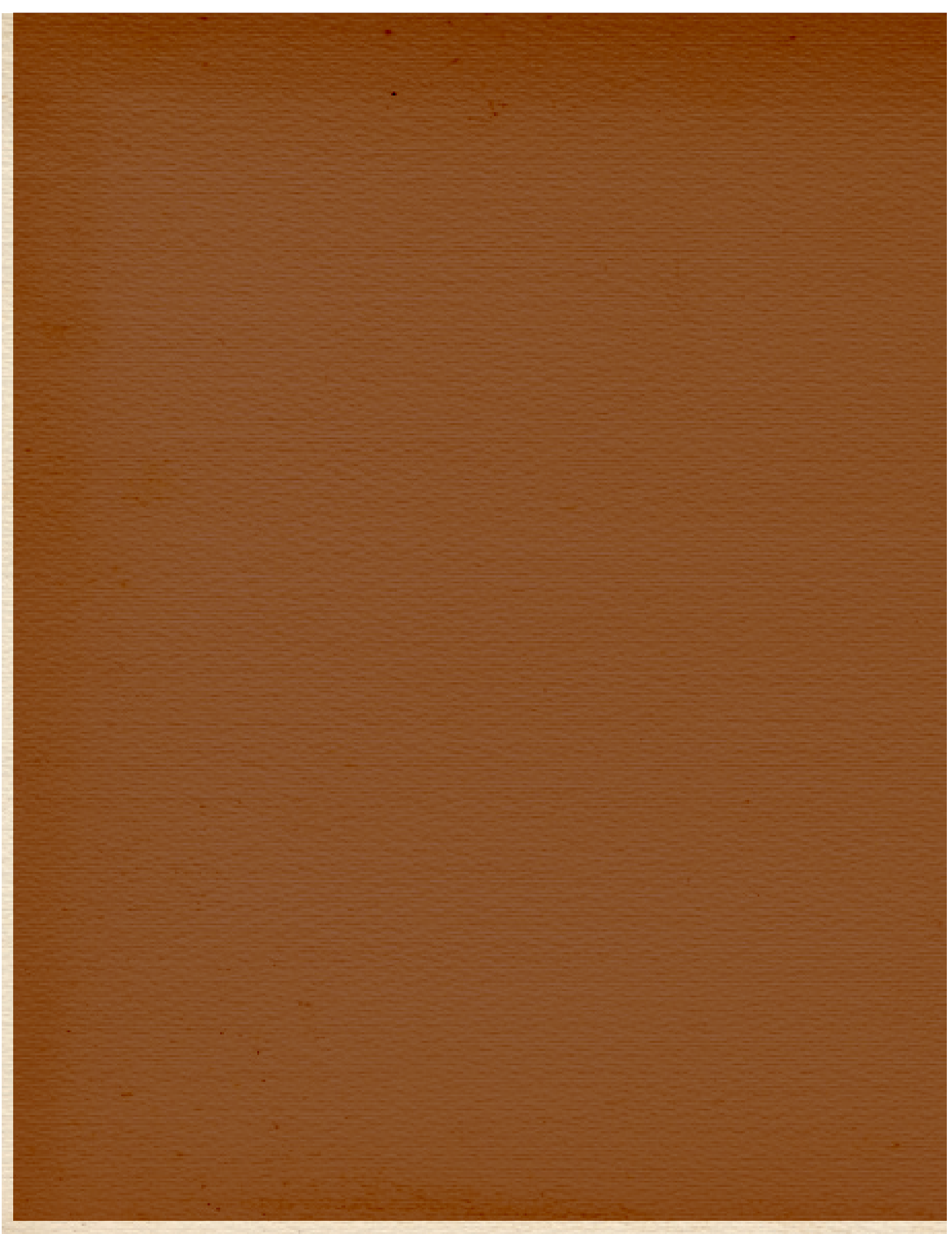
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*Recognizing when your teen's anger is out of control*



## Outback

THERAPEUTIC EXPEDITIONS



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*In this white paper, we discuss anger issues, outbursts, and defiance in teenagers, signs that your teen's anger is out of control, and provide an overview of treatment options. We focus on wilderness therapy, because it represents a full behavioral and clinical intervention.*

*This white paper is written for parents and guardians of teens struggling with anger, defiance, and emotional outbursts, with the intention of providing solutions and resources for families of adolescents struggling with behavioral, psychological or emotional challenges.*

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## Anger Management: Emotional Outbursts and Teenage Defiance

Let's face it, the teenage years are notoriously difficult years for parents and children alike. Hormones are raging, boundaries are being tested, and adolescents are making their first steps into adult privileges and responsibilities. While some parent-child conflict is normal during the teenage years, there comes a point where anger turns from a valid emotional response into a level of turmoil that should be addressed promptly.

Anger is part of our emotional spectrum, and is a normal, healthy emotional response to outside stressors. In fact, anger helps us to "deal" with threats when we feel crossed or challenged. It is when we let our emotions effect our actions that anger can become harmful in teens. In fact, according to Harvard Medical School, nearly two-thirds of U.S. adolescents have experienced an "anger attack" involving threatening violence, engaging in violence, or destroying property at some point in their lives. Even more alarming is the fact that nearly eight percent of these adolescents have "regular outbursts" like these.

- Normal Teenage Emotions vs. Problematic Anger, Outbursts, and Defiance
- Signs Your Teen's Anger Is Out of Control
- Ways to Help Your Teen Control Their Anger
- The Importance of Early Intervention
- Effective Treatment Options
- What is Wilderness Therapy and How Does It Help Teens with Anger?
- How to Support Your Teen Through Treatment

## Normal Teenage Emotions vs. Problematic Anger, Outbursts, and Defiance

The teenage years can be rough: growing up, changing hormones, grappling for more independence with parents, new privileges, and taking on new responsibilities. This can be overwhelming for teens. It is completely normal for teens to be moody, and even angry during these years. While it is normal for teens to experience anger, lashing out (making verbal threats, becoming destructive, or physical violence) is often a cry for help. There are some situations where anger and emotional outbursts go beyond the scope of “growing pains” and typical teen angst.

Some teens are better equipped emotionally to deal with anger in a healthy way and some need a little more help. Other teens experience problematic anger due to an unresolved mental health issue, frustration/anxiety from an uncontrollable life experience, or from crumbling under the added pressure that comes along with growing up. There are a number of issues that can trigger extreme emotional outbursts, anger, and defiance in teens:

**LOW SELF ESTEEM** - When teens are down on themselves, feelings of hurt and anger can build up inside them. This can lead to emotional outbursts and acts of defiance.

**BULLYING FROM PEERS** - Teens who experience bullying can often experience feelings of social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, low self esteem, and fear. This can be a traumatic experience during the formative years of one’s life. Since many teens do not have the coping skills to deal with these feelings, some will lash out with anger and emotional outbursts.

**AN UNRESOLVED FAMILY CONFLICT** - Some teens are not emotionally equipped to deal with a major family conflict or trauma, such as divorce, abuse, or issues stemming from adoption. Even adults have trouble dealing with these issues. Since teens do not know how to cope with the negative feelings associated with these situations, some will experience angry outbursts and will commit acts of defiance as (unhealthy) ways to cope with things that are out of their control.

**GRIEF** - Because anger is one of the stages of grief, it is only natural for a teen who has lost a friend or family member to feel some anger. Some teens, however, experience difficulties moving past this stage, especially when it is a traumatic loss of someone very close to him or her.

**DEVELOPMENTAL OR NEUROLOGICAL ISSUE** - (i.e. ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder.) Teens who have neuro-developmental issues such as these can have problems with a lack of self awareness/self control, impulse control, social skill deficits, and difficulties managing/handling emotions, especially anger. In addition, these teens can be more sensitive to sensory information from the outside world, causing them to become easily overwhelmed or overstimulated.

**DEPRESSION** - Teens and adults display signs and symptoms of depression very differently. Although an adult who is depressed will likely appear sad, many teens with an undiagnosed form of depression is much more prone to emotional outbursts, frustration, and hostility.

**ANXIETY** - Some teens who seem defiant or experience emotional outbursts are actually struggling with anxiety. Since depression and anxiety are often associated as “adult” problems, these can go undiagnosed in children and teens. This is a misconception, as anxiety and depression can appear during adolescence.

**THE PRESSURE/STRESS OF TEENAGE LIFE** - When children transition into their teenage years, there is an increased pressure to perform well in school, get into college, play well in sports, do well on tests, etc.

*While anger is a normal emotional response to outside stressors, teens need to learn healthy coping mechanisms now, before they reach adulthood. Teens need to know that it is not wrong or bad to feel angry, but that they cannot let the anger consume them or control their actions. This is vital to ensuring that your child's anger remains a valid emotional reaction rather than escalating into violence, defiant behavior, or rage.*

## Signs Your Teen's Anger Is Out of Control

Sometimes, as a parent, you are so close to the situation that it is difficult to be objective about your child's anger issues. Some parents are quick to brush off anger as a normal part of the teenage experience, while others grow very concerned over emotional outbursts and acts of defiance. Remember that anger is a normal, healthy response that is innate in human nature, and is actually part of the fight or flight response. Yelling, arguing, name-calling, and crying can all be normal teenage responses to anger-- so long as they do not escalate to violence or rage. However, if your child regularly experiences the "red flag" signs below, his or her anger issues may need to be addressed:

### **RED FLAG SIGNS OF PROBLEMATIC ANGER**

- Getting into physical fights at school or at home with siblings
- Excessive arguing with parents, teachers, peers, siblings, etc.
- Excessive emotional outbursts and rage
- Frequent irritability
- Irrationality
- Bullying
- Relationship/dating violence
- Verbal threats
- Being cruel to younger siblings or pets (those who can't defend themselves)
- Physical violence
- Destroying property
- Self-harm (cutting, burning, etc.) *\*\*This is a symptom of depression, which can be a culprit of teen anger, emotional outbursts, and defiance*

*If your teen's anger goes beyond the normal, emotional response to outside stressors, and your child exhibits the signs above, a logical next step is to consult with his or her physician or mental healthcare provider. A professional will be able to provide the proper guidance to obtaining help for your son or daughter.*

## Ways to Help Your Teen with Their Anger Problem

As mentioned previously, some teens aren't emotionally equipped to deal with anxiety, depression, conflict, or trauma in a healthy way. While many parents' first instinct is to "control" or "manage" their teen's anger, it is important to remember that you can not control someone else's emotions or actions. What you can do, is set realistic expectations and consequences, and give your child the tools to more effectively cope with his or her negative emotions.

### **ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS, RULES, AND CONSEQUENCES**

If you haven't already, establish clear rules and consequences for breaking said rules. It is important to have this conversation when you and your teen are both calm, cool, and collected. This will ensure that you have a rational, non judgemental conversation with your son or daughter. Explain that anger is a valid emotional reaction that everyone experiences, and that you are more concerned about the negative, angry behaviors that they are displaying-- not the emotion itself.

### **HELP GET TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM**

When your child has calmed down, talk to your them and try to find out what is really bothering them. Trying to have a rational conversation while your teen is still having an emotional outburst or fit of rage will be counter-productive, and may cause you to become frustrated as well. Ask questions: "Is something wrong at school or with friends?" Listen to his or her problems without judgement; just remember, they may become angry, or they may not tell you. It is still important to show that you do care.

### **REDUCE SCREEN TIME**

Spending too much time on electronic devices (smart phones, video game consoles, tablets, etc.) can hinder your child's sleep hygiene. Poor sleeping patterns can lead to irritability, and further vulnerability to angry outbursts. In addition, it is important to monitor your teens' electronic device habits, as exposure to violent tv shows, video games, and movies can increase the likelihood of violent behavior and outbursts as well.

### **HELP YOUR TEEN FIND A HEALTHY OUTLET OR WAY TO EXPRESS ANGER**

Helping your teen to find an outlet for anger is a great way to provide a healthier coping mechanism for negative emotions. Everyone is different, so see what appeals to your child. Healthy outlets for anger can include:

- sports
- exercise
- yoga
- writing in a journal
- playing loud, angry music

### **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Make sure that you are using healthy coping mechanisms to deal with your anger. Children learn what they live. In addition, if your teen sees you become belligerent when you are angry, your teen may think that this is an appropriate emotional response. This is especially important to remember when your teen is having an outburst. As hard as it sounds, remaining calm during your child's outbursts will help diffuse the situation.

## The Importance of Early Intervention

Although some parents are all too quick to brush off teen anger as their child being a “moody teen” or “hormonal,” parents should seek outside help if their child exhibits “red flag signs” that his or her anger is out of control. Those signs could signify an underlying problem, such as an undiagnosed mental health issue or an unresolved conflict or trauma that needs to be addressed. If left unresolved, anger can escalate and cause many problems in a young person’s life, including:

- Trouble at school
- Trouble with the law
- Becoming consumed with anger; holding grudges and not being able to leave things in the past when others have wronged them
- Hurting themselves or others
- Isolation
- Strained family and peer relationships

In addition to these immediate risks, teens who do not receive help for their unresolved anger issues are at risk for developing lifelong maladaptive patterns/unhealthy coping mechanisms for anger that will be more difficult to change later in life. These could lead to more serious problems down the road, such as domestic violence.

In addition to helping teens learning healthier coping mechanisms for their anger, early intervention is also vital in helping your teen resolve whatever underlying issues are behind his or her anger problem. For example, if your teen is exhibiting anger and emotional outbursts due to an undiagnosed anxiety disorder, it is much better to address this issue in adolescence, rather than waiting until he or she has reached adulthood. Not only does your child have the potential to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms for anger, but he or she could develop unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with anxiety as well.

## Effective Treatment Options

Some parents will hesitate to seek treatment, brushing off problematic anger as “teenage angst” or “growing pains.” If your son or daughter’s anger and emotional outbursts have become problematic, then early intervention is key to helping him or her deal with anger in a healthy way. Every individual is different; your child’s treatment options will depend on the following factors:

- Type of diagnosis your child receives or issue(s) he/she is facing
- The extent of his/her symptoms
- Your child’s age, healthy, and medical history
- Your preference(s)
- Your child’s response to clinical/behavioral intervention
- Your child’s response to certain medication(s) and/or therapies

While every individual is different, here are some common, effective treatment options for problematic anger, outbursts, and defiance in teens.



**PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Interacting with the wilderness has inherent consequences - cause and effect. Many troubled teens have spent most of their lives resisting consequences imposed by authority figures. This is not a healthy way to move through life, as troubled teens grow into adults who will ultimately have to deal with the ramifications of their choices. The wilderness therapy environment teaches this lesson in a gentle way; if a participant chooses to set up their sleeping shelter in a haphazard manner, for example, they may find that they get rained on and have to fix it in the middle of the night. These kinds of choices provide immediate and direct consequences, which can then be compared to ways that the participant may have enacted similar behaviors while at home.

**MEDICATION (DEPENDING ON DIAGNOSIS)**

Depending on your child's diagnosis, he or she may be prescribed medication. To help with any underlying diagnosis he or she receives. Some teens who are diagnosed with depression are too young for certain antidepressants; some teens with ADHD do not respond as well to stimulant medications. It is important to find a mental healthcare provider who has a lot of experience working with teens to ensure that your child receives adequate treatment.

**ANGER MANAGEMENT CLASSES**

Aside from regular psychotherapy sessions, your child's healthcare provider may suggest anger management classes as well. These classes cover effective, healthy coping mechanisms to help your teen recognize angry feelings and deal with his or her anger in-the-moment. Your child may learn breathing techniques, relaxation skills, and proper ways to express angry feelings to others.

**RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT**

Sometimes, when traditional talk therapy isn't enough, a residential treatment program may be helpful for your teen. While there are a plethora of residential treatment programs qualified to help your child, it is important to do your research and find a credible program. Even though sending your child away for treatment is difficult, doing the best thing for your son or daughter is not always the easy thing.

## What is Wilderness Therapy and How Does It Help Teens with Anger?

Do you remember as a child how you could spend hours throwing a ball against a wall and love how it would bounce back towards you? That is similar to an adolescent's anger. They will throw out subtle comments, cutting remarks or a defiant behaviors and await a negative reaction. In this way, they feel like they have control over their environment. Parents become the wall that provides an entertaining game to play.

When traditional talk therapy isn't enough to help teens who have problematic anger, parents sometimes turn to residential treatment programs instead. While there are a variety of residential treatment options out there, wilderness therapy is especially effective at helping adolescents in a way that talk therapy can't.

### **WHAT IS WILDERNESS THERAPY?**

How does wilderness therapy reach teens in a way that parents, talk therapy, and even traditional residential treatment programs can't? According to Keith C. Russell, a leading researcher of wilderness therapy, "Wilderness therapy utilizes outdoor adventure pursuits and other activities, such as primitive skills and reflection, to enhance personal and interpersonal growth."

The wilderness environment is more similar to a pillow wall that does not return the ball thrown at it. In this game, the child has to walk up to the pillow wall, retrieve the ball, then walk back and throw it again, only to repeat this tedious process. It isn't nearly as fun and requires far more effort.

### **THERAPEUTIC WILDERNESS SETTING**

Unlike other residential treatment programs, wilderness therapy utilizes the benefits of outdoor living. Studies show that simply being outdoors has mental health benefits. Benefits of the therapeutic wilderness setting include:

- Reduces stress
- Positive benefits to cognitive health (Wells 2000)
- Reduction in ADHD symptoms (Kuo, PhD, Frances E., and Faber Taylor, PhD. 2004)
- Enhances social interactions and makes teens "nicer" (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan 2009)

### **THERAPEUTIC GROUP LIVING**

The therapeutic group living experienced during wilderness therapy helps teens with their interpersonal communication skills and building strong peer relationships. The group living situation provides teens a chance to learn from others who are experiencing similar hardships and overcoming anger issues through wilderness therapy.

### **POSITIVE ROLE MODELS IN THE FORM OF FIELD STAFF AND THERAPISTS**

In addition to the bonds formed with other teens who are learning to deal with emotions in a healthy way, wilderness therapy participants learn healthy ways to cope with anger and other negative emotions from the experienced field guides and therapists. Field guides are trained to defuse situations instead of escalate them.

Many students will "test" field guides and act out negatively for a reaction. Some will even act out as a form of "revenge" for parents sending them to treatment. Instead of participating in the game of reacting negatively, field guides are trained to redirect conversations skillfully enough that can not justify their poor behavior, and will eventually comply willingly. The wilderness provides a proverbial mirror for a child to see their behaviors for what they are...theirs.

### **HELPS SHOW TEENS THAT ANGER HAS CONSEQUENCES**

Wilderness therapy demonstrates to teens that acting out of anger or defiance will not get them anywhere. Instead of lecturing or punishing teens, wilderness therapy utilizes natural consequences to demonstrate this in a way they understand. For example, when a teen is angry refuses to put effort into making a quality backpack frame because they want to punish their parents for sending them to the wilderness, the weight is not evenly distributed on their backs and often causes needless aches and discomfort. When a child puts minimal effort into tying their shelter down securely, they

may have a terrible night's rest as they stay awake listening to the tarp flapping loosely in the wind. There is no one to be mad at for those things besides themselves. There is no one to engage in a fun game of returning the ball.

### **HELPS TEENS DEAL WITH EMOTIONS**

While many teens who are struggling with emotional outbursts and anger issues feel uncomfortable discussing their feelings, wilderness therapy helps to address this. According to Russell, "the process also teaches clients how to access and express their emotions, and why talking about feelings is important." (Russell 2001) This, in turn, will help your teen express what is upsetting them, before his or her emotions become uncontrollable.

### **PROVIDES A STRONG SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT FOR TEENS**

Another aspect that sets wilderness therapy apart from other residential treatment programs is the strong sense of accomplishment upon completion. Russell states that "completing a wilderness therapy program represents a sense of accomplishment for the client that is concrete and real, and can be used to draw strength from in the future." (Russell 2001) That strength will prove useful in overcoming future obstacles in your teen's life.

### **INSTILLS SELF CONFIDENCE AND SELF EFFICACY**

The sense of accomplishment and strength that many teens gain from completing wilderness therapy is key in helping boost his or her self confidence and self efficacy. According to Russell, "Clients believe that if they completed wilderness therapy, they can also complete other formidable tasks." Self confidence is especially vital for teens who are exhibiting problematic anger due to low self esteem or bullying. Higher levels of self efficacy are linked to greater motivation, positive thinking skills, and lower vulnerability to stress and depression in teens.

## **How to Support Your Teen Through Wilderness Therapy**

As mentioned previously, although sending your child to treatment is hard, sometimes it is the best way to ensure that he or she receives adequate help for their anger issues and emotional outbursts. That does not mean you can not demonstrate to your child that he or she is loved and respected. Here are ways to support your child while he or she attends treatment for anger issues:

### **SELECT A CREDIBLE TREATMENT PROGRAM**

Not all wilderness therapy programs are created equal. If wilderness therapy is a route your family has selected, make sure that you find a safe, reliable, credible program to help your child through his or her anger issues. Look for a treatment program that is overseen by a licensed professional, ensures access to medical care, and fosters family involvement.

### **COMMUNICATE WITH THE TREATMENT TEAM**

As a parent and caregiver, being involved with the treatment team is vital to your child's success. While it is important to let the treatment team do their job, it is also important to be an effective advocate for your child. Speaking with the treatment professionals, understanding their recommendations, and discussing any concerns are almost as vital as sending your child to treatment in the first place. If appropriate, join your child's therapy session to learn how you can

support your child. After treatment, be sure to notify your child's healthcare provider or mental health professional if his or her anxiety or depression symptoms do not improve or if they increase.

**LEARN ABOUT YOUR TEEN'S ISSUES AND/OR DIAGNOSIS**

Find out more about whatever has been troubling your child and/or contributing to his or her emotional outbursts and problematic anger. If your child has been diagnosed with depression or it turns out that your child is still struggling with your divorce, find out more about how to help. Doing this will help you to make informed decisions during and after treatment. Research, read, attend support groups and parenting classes. In this age of information, it shouldn't be hard to learn more about your child's struggles. Learning as much as you can from your child about what the struggle has been like for them can help them feel of your support. In this type of program is to give them the resources they need to come

## Conclusion

If you are concerned about your son or daughter's problematic anger, emotional outbursts, and acts of defiance, it is important to recognize when anger goes too far. Early intervention is key to giving your child the tools to successfully manage his or her emotions in a healthy way as an adult. Wilderness therapy is a treatment method that many families have turned to, due to the unique way in which it reaches adolescents.

## Resources

Frances E. Kuo, PhD and Andrea Faber Taylor, PhD. A Potential Natural Treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Evidence From a National Study

Russell, Kieth C., (2001) "What is Wilderness Therapy?" The Journal of Experiential Education, Vol. 24, 70-79

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<http://hms.harvard.edu/news/uncontrollable-anger-prevalent-among-youth-7-2-12> (Harvard Medical School)

[http://www.nasponline.org/educators/hchsii\\_angermgmtteens.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/educators/hchsii_angermgmtteens.pdf) (National Association of School Psychologists)

*This white paper was sponsored by Outback Therapeutic Expeditions. Outback offers nomadic wilderness therapy in a safe, controlled setting for adolescents dealing with a range of behavioral, emotional, and psychological issues.*

### **ABOUT OUTBACK THERAPEUTIC EXPEDITIONS**

Outback Therapeutic Expeditions offers a unique therapeutic experience based on a nomadic and primitive skills model. The soothing rhythms of life in the wilderness provide a catalyst for authentic and lasting change. Each child is matched with a licensed therapist and receives a comprehensive individual treatment plan. Clinical studies confirm that our methods create long-lasting change and emotional healing.

Living in small groups away from the distractions and influences of the outside world, students are able to focus on themselves and the choices that brought them here. The insights and skills that they develop are carried with them when they return to the outside world.

Our Roots and Wings program carves an integral role for each teen's family as they work through the misunderstandings and pain that brought them to this point. Our three-day Family Expedition allows parents and siblings to join the student in the wilderness for powerful, intensive family therapy. At Outback, we believe that the family is vital to the healing process and plays an important role in bringing about positive change for each child.



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