"Anger is sometimes good, sometimes bad"

ANGER IN CHILDREN'S TV

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This article discusses how children experience the emotion anger, how they deal with it, and how they perceive anger presented in children's television and movies.

Children's TV offers many stories and narratives related to the topic "emotions:" Why do 2 characters love each other? Why and how do they have fun? Why is someone afraid in a certain situation and another person is not? – But what about the emotion "anger?"
Anger is often not visibly expressed in children's TV. Of course TV presents parents scolding their children or Squidward Tentacles (*SpongeBob SquarePants*) and Bert (*Sesame Street*) who are annoyed in certain situations. But anger as an emotion that makes you burn from the inside and makes your teeth gnash and your muscles tense up (Glasenapp, 2013) is not shown in children's TV.

Children's anger has a bad reputation

THE EMOTION ANGER

Anger, especially children's anger, has a very bad reputation, since it is closely associated with discussions of aggression and violence. In the story of *Shock-headed Peter* it is the fierce character "Cruel Frederick" (cf. Ill. 1-3), who to this day clearly illustrates to children and adults that blind and destructive

rage leads to suffering and to violence against people, animals, and objects. Considering how children's anger is perceived, it is not surprising that self-help books for adults for dealing with children's anger usually focus on the children, who themselves deal with anger in an uncontrolled and problematic way. Dieter Krowatschek, an expert in children's anger, explains in his book (2004) that children first have to learn "to get their way, to draw boundaries, and to say no. That is often only possible with conflict. (...) It is part of children's realm of experience to defy others, to try out unacceptable behaviour, and to be aggressive. Aggressive behaviour is a problem when it becomes excessive. When children are extremely irascible, act aggressively in an unrestrained way, and cannot control themselves, then the people in their environment will start to reject, avoid, and isolate them." (ibid., p. 14) Children's anger is thus associated with sickness and therapy. The *Online Family Handbook* names a variety of reasons why children become angry: attempts to become independent, feeling overwhelmed, lack of movement, stimulus satiation, low self-esteem, false expectations about roles (such as maleness), frustration, or particular role models for anger in media, in the family, or among friends. These children are commonly described as impulsive, uncontrolled, and narcissistic – as children who have since birth displayed the ability to think and act in a cruel way (Büttner, 1993). However on closer inspection the fact that anger is correlated with violence

and aggression is very problematic; even more problematic is the way violence in our contemporary society is discussed based upon examples of children's anger. This way of representing anger in children's television could lead to the conclusion that it is the job of children's programming to morally denounce anger, to illustrate its negative consequences, and to help children learn to have an anger-free childhood.

Anger is a common part of children's lives

While this focus upon the small group of particularly aggressive children may be important for the affected children, parents, friends, or teachers, it has little to do with the real-life experience of most children. Anger is a common part of children's everyday life, and they often solve their conflicts by physical means, and this can get tough: "Bopping each other, kicking, wrestling, or painfully slapping each other's hands. Even though they may even sometimes stare fiercely at each other, this is just rough-and-tumble play. In the context of play, children dare to act in ways that would otherwise not be tolerated by other kids: ranting and raving, choking, continued tickling on sensitive spots." (Krappmann & Oswald, 1995, p. 127) These games might be played just barely within the limits of acceptability, but those children who do not play by the rules are admonished by others. A child who repeatedly releases uncontrolled bouts of rage and does

not control his/her aggression risks being excluded by the other children. Anger within social limits is thus a part of childhood, and like joy, sorrow, disgust, or surprise, it can be found in all cultures (Schneider & Lindenberger, 2012, p. 204). Anger can already be observed in very small children, and it usually arises when someone is confronted with obstacles to what he or she is doing. Already during their first months of life, children learn "to differentiate between happy, angry, and neutral facial expressions" (Oerter & Montada, 2008, p. 202), and emotions are strongly related to social behaviour and communication with others. Children learn early on to express their feelings and with this, their emotional state to others: "In the course of development (8 to 12 months), children's facial expressions become more expressive, especially in showing surprise, fear, and anger (...). By 18 months of age, they can influence situations (...) purposefully (...). Small children show (...) 'emotional intelligence' before they can communicate verbally about their emotions." (ibid., p. 203) Anger is always directed at other people and shows that others have not adequately taken into account that person's needs. "Emotions are triggers for motivation and provoke action. They especially have the function of regulating one's own actions or those of others (...). Children gradually learn to use emotional expressions as effective means of communication in order to influence other people." (ibid., p. 204) Since showing anger is a form of communication and a normal part of life, we should aim to understand it and find peaceful and constructive ways of communicating anger in social interaction.

ANGER IN CHILDREN'S FILM AND TELEVISION

Anger is presented in diverse ways in children's television and cannot be discussed from only one perspective. Anger takes on a different meaning in a comedy television show than it does in a conflict-ridden drama, for instance about family life, or in films dealing with brutal violence and oppression. Anger has many facets and nuances and encompasses a rich and complex emotional world, in and of itself. This is even evident in the vocabulary associated with anger. Someone can be smouldering with anger, feel irate or even enraged. He or she can be resentful, sulky, or disgruntled. One may feel slightly irritated, indignant, wrathful, or irascible – or be consumed by murderous rage. Anger can be insane or drive one to insanity; one can become red with fury or be snorting with rage. An angry outburst can knock someone unconscious, and one can be beside oneself with rage. In the end, however, anger usually subsides and dissipates, because someone does something to assuage these feelings. Anger is definitely always a source of energy, whether this be to do something unjust or to rebel against injustice.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ANGER

In order to evaluate the quality of anger in children's television, it is important to distinguish between 3 levels (cf. Ill. 4). On the first level, one can ask, "What is the source of this anger? Is it legitimate, and can children comprehend the anger, that is, connect to the angry person?" When someone has been treated unjustly, been oppressed, or been denied necessities of life, then the anger is justified, just as it is when someone has been deceived, betrayed, disillusioned, or robbed. Anger is also legitimate when it is a reaction to an injustice toward someone else. Anger is illegitimate or does not seem justified when it helps one assert one's own egotistical interests, or when someone takes out their anger on someone weaker, knowing that the victim cannot return the like. To begin with, what is the source of anger? Is it understand-

(Source: Burkhard Fuhs)
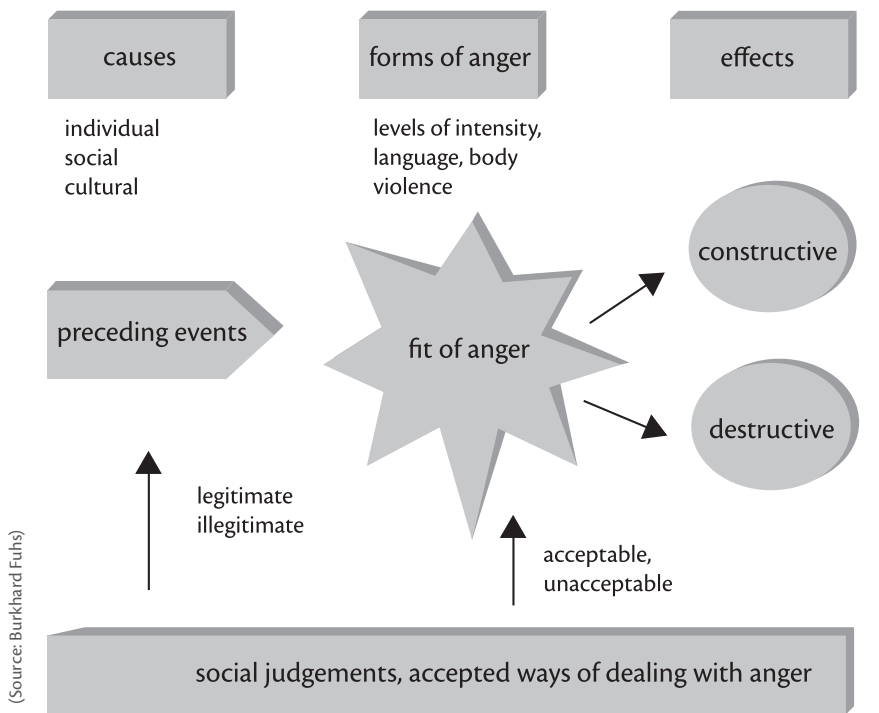
Ill. 4: Processes of anger

able why someone has become angry, and is his or her anger justified?

On the second level, there are questions regarding what the anger does to the character. Does it gnaw at him/her or torment him/her? Is the hero/heroine conscious of the anger, or does he or she feel helpless? In television one can see how anger is processed, whether it quietly smoulders or explodes like a volcano, destroying things and injuring animals and people. What does anger do to people? How do people experience and live out their anger? Anger can be connected to feelings of helplessness, or, in a bully, to strength and violence. There is also a difference between the anger that is directed at oneself and the anger that is directed at one's environment.

In the end, the question is, "What were the consequences of the anger?" Are the relationships healable or not? Did the anger turn into hate, wrath, and violence or into respect, understanding, or more justice? Some fits of anger are destructive, and some have emancipatory effects. What kind of damage was caused? What did it perhaps improve in the way people deal with each other?

PORTRAYALS OF ANGER IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

In children's programming there are typical tools for presenting anger. First, anger and the rise of anger are visibly shown in a character's face. A close-up depiction of the character's facial expressions conveys his or her anger in a recognisable way: "A deep, vertical crease on one's forehead, tightly pressed lips, a pulsing artery in one's neck, or narrowed eyes. Film purposefully pans in and out between close-up and long-shot perspectives to illustrate particular forms of bodily expression, such as fists or throwing of objects." (Peklo, 2013, p. 38) There are numerous techniques for conveying how anger develops and is expressed, and sometimes music is also silenced in order to draw the viewer's attention to these images and actions. In effect, children's television does not represent anger as a static emotion; anger is integrated into the film's narrative and into a process worth presenting.

When it comes to experiencing emotions, in-depth interviews with 16 German children in the third grade revealed more about children's complex relationship to anger. These children said that they become angry mainly when they are insulted, treated unjustly, robbed, hit, teased, or "when mama scolds me" (Peklo, 2013, p. 42). Children blame themselves, but also others (especially peers of the same age) for their anger. When they are angry and feel bad, they scream, stomp, cry, kick things, and slam doors. Sometimes, however, they enjoy getting angry, "because you can let off steam." Many already have techniques for dealing with their anger, such as crying, listening to music, walking away, holding their breath for 10 seconds, or asking parents or friends for help. Some typical techniques these children use to calm themselves down are riding their bicycle, playing on the keyboard, going to their room, talking with their parents, throwing themselves on their bed, getting some fresh air, watching television, or listening to music.

The representative IZI survey of 704 children aged 6 to 12 years on the topic of emotions (cf. Götz & Schwarz in this issue) clearly shows that anger belongs to everyday life, but that for most children it is not present every day. 40% reported that they were not angry at all in the last week, half of them were seldom angry in the last 7 days, and only 13% said they were angry. Only 8% said that they openly display their anger, 20% said they show it somewhat. The overwhelming majority said that they hardly show their anger at all or hide it from others completely. This is not surprising, considering that only 1 out of 10 children said that their parents find it good to show their anger; around 90% find displays of anger not so good or not good at all. The older the children are, the more their parents categorically disapprove of displays of anger. In contrast to their own way of showing emotions, they wish that the TV characters deal with the emotion "anger" frankly and openly. Over half of the children find it very good (17%)

or somewhat good (38%) when TV characters honestly showed that they were angry; just under half find this is somewhat negative (33%) or completely negative (12%). Especially the older children wished that the TV characters expressed anger more openly (cf. Ill. 5). This shows that children live in a world in which the emotion anger and the display of this emotion are considered negative and children are normally encouraged not to express their anger. For many of them, children's TV programmes offer one of the few possibilities to learn about anger and ways of dealing with it as well as to experience this "forbidden" emotion through the media.

Children are interested in anger in film and television, and they evaluate whether the anger is justified and whether it was expressed appropriately. When asked whether she finds anger in children's programming negative or positive, one 10-year-old girl said she finds it good. Other children see anger only in a negative way. And yet another group finds that anger has positive and negative aspects (ibid.). Looking more specifically at presentations of children being angry in television, the answers, even within this one classroom of children, are very heterogeneous: 3 children found it positive, 5 negative, 4 were indifferent, and 5 named additional associations they had with anger, such as "silly," "ok," "sometimes good, sometimes bad." Their answers were also diverse with regard to whether or not they thought they could learn something from their favourite characters' anger. One third did not answer this question, one third said they could learn something about dealing with anger from films and television, and one third said they could not.

Children evaluate anger in television differently. Not all children can handle watching anger in film and television; some say they are uncomfortable with it. Other children are fascinated by it. By and large, children see both the negative and positive sides and are pleased when a fit of anger helps the story take a positive turn in the end.

The anger which protagonists show in children's programming provokes different feelings, from getting angry themselves to being entertained by watching others' anger.

Classical fits of anger (for instance those of parents) may evoke not only negative feelings, but also positive ones, since watching the fit and its typical sequence of events, may also give them comfort or a familiar feeling or even make them happy (ibid., p. 52). However, the same depiction of anger in a scene may prompt disparate reactions, from joy and laughter to fascination and fear. Children do not always take anger seriously; they may even find fits of anger funny (for instance in *Laurel and Hardy*). However, depictions of anger may also shock and frighten children.

CONCLUSION

Anger is an important topic for children. However, not every way of depicting anger can adequately help children gain a better understanding of how to deal with this emotion constructively. One sign of quality would be to convey the understanding of anger as an emotion that emerges in a process. It would be beneficial to show – according to the age of the children – how anger develops, why people get angry and which consequences different forms of anger can have for children. Anger is an important feeling that tells and teaches us a lot about life. Banning anger – as is the case in the story of *Shockheaded Peter* – does not lead anywhere. ∎

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