RAISING BUDDHIST CHILDREN IN AMERICAN SOCIETY
HELPING YOUR CHILD MANAGE ANGRY FEELINGS AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS
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As humanistic parents, we struggle to teach values to our children. It can be discouraging and confusing to receive a call that your child faces suspension for an aggressive act. Whether your fifteen-year-old is fistfighting or your three-year-old is biting another child, angry feelings and aggressive behaviors can be frustrating to deal with. What's important is that we learn about and challenge our children's anger and aggression as we would any other obstacle. When a child is often angry or aggressive, it is useful to look at his or her overall life experience and consider what it is that he or she needs. What is the function of the child's anger? What are they trying to communicate to us?

As parents who study and practice the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, we learn intellectually that each life contains the ten worlds, from Hell to Buddhahood, at all times. However, in our daily lives this awareness tends to recede from our grasp. It may be difficult to look at a beautiful child and recognize that he or she may have a negative influence on our lives. Conversely, when parents experience their child as exhausting, demanding and disobedient, it may be hard to remember that each child has a Buddha nature. Trust that they do.

From a Buddhist perspective, Anger is an expression of the fourth of the ten worlds or life-conditions. It is one of the four evil paths, a state dominated by a selfish ego. People in this state value themselves but hold others in contempt. They are attached to the idea of their own superiority and cannot bear to be inferior to others. It is noteworthy that Buddhism acknowledges that Anger can function as both good and evil, as noted in the definitions below.

In the field of psychology, there are a wide variety of definitions of anger. We have chosen to share two with you from popular writers. We find these to be the most helpful, as they are commensurate with the Buddhist view of life. Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., describes anger as a signal. It "may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right…. The pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our self." 1 Hendric Weisinger, Ph.D., defines anger as having four components. He describes it as an emotion that is "physically arousing and has unique physiological correlates; secondly, as a feeling which impacts the way we experience life; thirdly, as a communicator of information and lastly as a cause." 2

Aggression, which is not the same as anger, refers to the motor activity, or physical acting out, with the intent to hurt someone or something through physical contact. Anger does not necessarily cause aggression, but rather may add to an aggressive response.

Most often parents want to know what to do, how to "fix it" when their children don't act the way they want. If we take action without understanding the individual child, however, we may only increase his or her problems in coping with angry feelings and aggressive behaviors. As Nichiren Daishonin writes: "[W]hen giving medicine to a sick person, one should know what

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kind of medicine was administered before. Otherwise, different kinds of medicine may conflict and work against one another, killing the patient."3 Life is a dynamic process and children are readily influenced by the life-condition of their parents. Therefore, it is important for parents to monitor their own anger process as well. (For more information on this topic, see "Transforming Our Angry Nature," *Living Buddhism*, February 2001). As parents, we need to attend to our children based on their developmental needs and how they may be experiencing life.

Prior to helping your children change their behaviors and cope with feelings, it is important to understand more about their developmental process in general. This also means that in order to understand emotional issues or problems, it is necessary to review a child's early life experiences. For parents with older children, this may seem redundant, yet a child's response patterns, including those involved with anger, develop in their earliest years (please see diagram above).4

Although part of a child's brain has developed at birth to allow for reflexes and the instincts for biological existence, a baby cannot survive without human contact and care. Though not a blank slate, a baby's brain is a very immature organ at birth. It is pliable and extremely receptive to the external environment, forming its internal organization in part through integrating experiences in response to that environment. As Buddhists we recognize this as a manifestation of the principle of the 'oneness of person and environment.' Rothschild states: "How a brain first organizes is dependent on the infant's interactions with its environment. How a brain continues to grow, develop and reorganize is dependent on the subsequent experiences throughout a child's life…. It is now believed that the nurturing interaction between caregiver and infant goes a long way in promoting healthy emotional development, because that relationship, in itself, stimulates normal maturation of the brain and nervous system." 5

Infants do not place different values on their emotions; they all have equal value — including anger. "To be sure, parents can encourage some emotions and discourage others. But avoiding an emotion that is part of the definition of humanity is dehumanizing — even though it is an emotion that is difficult and sometimes frightening to deal with."6 Therefore, instead of disapproving and cutting off our child's angry feelings we can give him or her tools to tolerate this welling up of feelings, to communicate them, and to learn to manage both feelings and actions.

The ways we can help our children manage anger begin at birth. The Greenspans' developmental model provides a clear understanding of normal development (see sidebar: A Baby's Requirements to Meet Each of His or Her Emotional Milestones).7 To help children tolerate the welling up of angry feelings, parents can acknowledge these and teach soothing skills. It is also important to teach the use of words and ideas so children have choices to move from direct physical expression to pretend play. As anger is a signal that something is not right, they can also be taught how to assert themselves verbally to create change when there is a problem. Teaching is a basic task of parenting. Daisaku Ikeda has stated: "Only a human being can foster another human being. It takes a truly humanistic person to raise a truly humanistic person."8 Eventually children can also be taught to observe and intervene in their own pattern of anger and to increase their ability to choose their own responses. This creates self-reliance and improves self-confidence.

In the Greenspans' model, they address specific problems and offer parents a wide variety of examples to use with children from birth to four years of age. In our own work with children, we apply these basic principles to children of all ages with adaptations for later stages of development. Keep in mind that it takes time to strengthen inner controls, so parents should expect ups and downs as they apply new ideas. Having a foundation of a nurturing environment with consistent verbal and non-verbal limits is important to children of every age. Its creation occurs in parents' moment-to-moment engagement with their children. It is not

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something that is accomplished and checked off a list. It is easier to address specific anger issues on such a nurturing foundation.

Parents cannot teach children in the heat of anger. Parents must first focus on soothing and containing their children's angry outburst. This may be holding and speaking softly to a young child or taking time away from each other before problem solving with a teen. Parents need to attend to what their child needs when distressed. Sometimes the physical charge of anger is so great that a physical activity to vent it is needed. This could be a sport activity, throwing beanbags at a target or socking a pillow. Also children can be encouraged to draw pictures of what they are angry about and scribble over them or tear them up. The idea is to create a safe vehicle for the energy to decrease its physical charge. After this venting, effective problem solving can begin. Some children need a period of pleasurable activity after venting to transition to problem solving.

Consider what your children's patterns are and what each one needs. Regular play periods with your children offer venting opportunities before anger can come to a head. Whether it's pretend action-figure play where the child can attack your team or smash your cars, or more structured games such as Sorry, Aggravation or Chess, there are outlets that move energy from a physical level to that of ideas, or symbolic action. Having anger is not a choice; it is part of being human. What we choose to do or not to do with anger can be under our control. The following are examples of how parents can assist their children:

CHILD (yelling): "You are so unfair! You don't care if I have any friends!"
PARENT (stays calm): "I can understand that you are really angry and disappointed that you can't stay overnight at Susie's. Becoming better friends with her seems important to you." (The parent reflects feeling and the child's need.)
CHILD (still angry): "I'm the only one who can't go to her sleepover! Why do we have to go to Grandma's anyway?"
PARENT: "I guess you are feeling left out. We have had these plans to go out of town for weeks. I am sorry that Susie's party just came up and our trip interferes with it. I want to keep our promise to Grandma just like I want to keep promises to you." (Empathy; reminds the child of the structure that the parent keeps promises.)
CHILD (angry, but not yelling): "If I am not there they'll probably talk about me."
PARENT: "I see you are concerned about being thought of as an outsider. Would it be helpful if we plan to have Susie and the others over some weekend soon when we are home?" (Sincerely interested in addressing her daughter's developmental needs).
CHILD (now more calm): "OK."
PARENT: "What kinds of things will we have to do to set that up?" (Redirects the child's energy and engages her in a concrete plan.)

A second example of an interaction between a parent and an adolescent follows:
TEEN (very angry and yelling): "You said I could go to the football game this Friday and now you say I can't. You lied!"
PARENT (remaining calm): "I can hear and see that you are very angry and upset right now that you can't go to the game this Friday. I know that you really want to be with your friends and that it's important for you to be there." (Parent reflects hearing the adolescent's feeling and need).
TEEN (still angry): "Yeah! Fine! You hear me! So why can't I go!"
PARENT: "I know that you're probably feeling you'll miss something and you feel left out. I'm sorry that this has occurred, but you might remember that we talked last week about you going

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to the game this Friday only if you finished all of your homework." (The parent is empathetic, but states the adolescent's responsibility).
TEEN (still angry, but calmer): "Yeah, I remember, but I got most of it done."
PARENT: "Yes, you did, and I'm proud of you because I know it was hard work and took a long time to do, but our agreement was for all the homework to be completed." (Praise for the accomplishment and reminder of the agreement.)
TEEN (much calmer): "Yeah, thanks, but I really want to go."
PARENT: "I know you do and I'd like for you to go, too. Is there anything I can do to help you meet the homework contract for the next game?" (The parent shows concern and proposes a way for the two of them to engage and collaborate.)

Note that in the above examples the parents are not angry, nor are they trying to control their children. These parents have a high enough life-condition not to be pulled in by the child's anger. In each case, the parent's goal is to teach and support their child in a situation where the child is struggling with something that has evoked his or her own anger. The parents in these examples keep a broad view and have the compassion and wisdom to stay focused on helping their children. "How we as adults intervene to help children regain control is an important part of teaching them how to manage anger. Scolding and reprimanding after the fact has very little effect on the child's ability to learn to control impulses. In fact punishment often makes children more hostile and aggressive."9 Raising our children to be considerate, empathetic human beings, who can be self-reliant and have compassion for others is a fundamental aspect of our SGI-USA "Victory Over Violence" movement.

Part of a parent's job is to hold a broad perspective of our children. This means seeing the child's current life-condition, general function as a Bodhisattva of the Earth, and potential as a human being. We must also take responsibility for our own life-conditions, educate ourselves and develop wisdom and compassion toward our children. Being grounded in this overall view of life can help parents stay calm and use life events as teaching opportunities instead of becoming overwhelmed in the moment or hooked into control battles with their children. Magid and McKevey state, "When control becomes the main issue, love has taken a back seat."10 Parents must monitor their own levels of anger and the patterns that occur between themselves and their children. Without being aware of it, parents can incite angry responses from their children. Often this happens when parents don't respect children's privacy, or lecture and nag about routine issues, instead of setting up family methods with the children and holding that structure. If rules and a system are formed, they become the standard, tending to decrease conflict.

Essentially we create interpersonal harmony from our own basic life-condition. Although we have offered information, techniques and resources to assist parents, these will be most effective when based on a foundation of the parents' daily Buddhist practice. It takes strength of character and courage to function as a healthy parent. It is the purpose of Buddhist practice in the SGI-USA to uncover and bring forth the wisdom and capabilities that inherently exist in each life. When parents do this, they open their own condition of enlightenment and can bring greater happiness to the entire family.

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2. Weisinger, Hendric, Ph.D. *Dr. Weisinger's Workout Book*, New York: Qual, 1985, p. 12.
3. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 80.
4. Adapted from: Magid, Dr. Ken and Carole A. McKelvey. *High Risk*, Toronto: Bantam Books,

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5. Rothschild, Babette. *The Body Remembers*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000, p. 16.
6. Greenspan, Stanley, MD and Nancy Thorndike Greenspan. *The Essential Partnership*, New York: Viking, 1989, p. 132.
7. Ibid., Adapted from p. 3.
8. Ikeda, Daisaku. *Soka Education: A Buddhist Vision for Teachers, Students and Parents*, Santa Monica: Middleway Press, 2001, p. 179.
9. Mr. Rogers Neighborhood Child Care Partnership. *What Do You Do With The Mad That You Feel?* Pittsburgh, Pa: Family Communications, Inc., 1998.
10. Magid, Dr. Ken and Carole A. McKelvey. *High Risk*, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987, p. 245.

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