

The Many Faces of Anger by Violet Oaklander

Anger is the most misunderstood of all the human emotions. We tend to think of anger as basically distasteful and abhorrent -- something that we would rather not experience. Actually, I believe that anger is an expression of the self. It is a protection of one's boundaries. When a young child says, "NO!" in a loud voice, mobilizing all of the energy she has to express a dislike for something that offends her in some way, she is not angry as we have come to know it, she is expressing her very self. She must use a loud voice because she desperately wants to be heard. Her "no" comes from the core of her being. Since the child does not have the cognitive ability, the language, nor the diplomacy to express profound, basic feelings in pleasing ways she is perceived as angry.

The child soon learns that this kind of expression is unacceptable-that he may, if he continues to express the self in this vein, be in danger of abandonment. Since his survival depends on the adults in his life, he will make determinations about how to be in the world to insure that his needs are met. The child's self becomes diminished due to lack of expression, and his deep-felt feelings become buried somewhere inside of him.

Since the child's major developmental task is to grow up, a paradox takes form. As the child strives to flourish and thrive in her confusing world by calculating how to avoid her parents' disapproval and wrath, her organism struggles to achieve equilibrium and health. And so the expression of anger, this expression of self that has been frustrated and thwarted, pushes on to become something else-something beyond the child's awareness and control. One child may retrofect the anger energy by giving herself headaches, stomachaches, generally withdrawing, not speaking, or manifesting other self-inflicting symptoms. Another child will deflect the true feelings by hitting, kicking, striking out. Some children become hyperactive as a way to avoid feeling anything. Others anesthetize themselves and "space out." These are only a few of the behaviors and symptoms that mask fearful authentic expressions. These behaviors and symptoms are actually the child's fierce attempts to cope and survive in this stressful world. These inappropriate and unsatisfactory behaviors and symptoms are the many faces of anger.