

Interview with Andrew D. Gibson, PhD, author of *Got An Angry Kid? Parenting Spike: A Seriously Difficult Child*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Andrew Gibson, who is here to discuss his new book “Got An Angry Kid? Parenting Spike: A Seriously Difficult Child.”

Dr. Gibson earned his Ph.D. in Education at the University of Connecticut in 1987 under the tutelage of Richard Bloomer. He poured everything about his childhood and his experience as a parent into what became Parenting Angry Children and Teens (PACT) Training and the book, "Got An Angry Kid?" In 1993, the Connecticut State Department of Children and Families adopted the PACT methodology and since then 500 families have completed the year-long program with remarkable results.

Tyler: Welcome, Andrew. I’m excited to interview you today about your new book “Got An Angry Kid?” To begin, will you explain to us how you define an angry kid? Is it refusing to do chores, or destroying furniture—what’s the fine line or distinction you are drawing?

Andrew: Thanks. I appreciate your interest. Chores? What chores. You couldn't get Spike, our anti-hero of this book, to do a chore if his life depended on it. Mere failure to do chores is not an issue. The parents I work with have kids who haven't done a chore in years. Spike does not pick up socks or anything else. Let's get that straight right away.

I use Spike as the every-kid who is having a seriously tough time with adjustment and who has parents who don't know what to do as a result. Though he is fictional, it is easy for parents to relate to him and to identify with his parents. They all come across as real.

I often get parents in the program at the point where their Spike is threatening to pound them through the floor...or have, in fact, started pounding. These kids are nasty, mean and often foul-mouthed. They are demanding, disrespectful and contemptuous. It is anger by lots of different names. But how I define anger doesn't really matter. It is what parents finally see in their kid and what the parents' tolerance level is. Most parents have a low tolerance level for an oppositional kid, which doesn't help. They wind up feeding the beast, rather than discouraging him. All the parents I have trained have kids who have a psychiatric label or the behavior that would get them one if they could somehow drag their kid to a shrink.

But even with a label, parents are often reluctant to see anger. They can see hyperactivity, attention deficit, bi-polar, intermittent explosive and all the rest long before they see anger. It is as if they say, "My kid isn't angry; he is conduct disordered" as though the two couldn't exist simultaneously.

Guess what? They do. Every time. The dilemma for parents is that once they begin to see that their kid is angry, they are compelled to ask the question, "Angry at whom?" The finger inevitably points back at the parents whether they deserve it or not. About the last thing any of us want is to look in the mirror and see a failure as a parent. It's tough.

On the bright side, once parents see anger, they can do something about it themselves. The question is: how long will it take them to see anger? And will they care enough to do the work necessary once they see it? So as to your thought that there might be a fine line, there really isn't a fine line here. It is more like being smacked in the head with a shovel.

Tyler: Andrew, why do you think parents have difficulty assessing a child as angry? Wouldn't it be better to have an angry child, than a child who is bi-polar or one of the other conditions you mentioned above. Is it because the other labels do not reflect blame while anger can be blamed on the parent, or have we become so used to categorizing conditions that we forget common sense in defining a child's behavior?

Andrew: You hit the nail on the head: Blame. Parents already feel blamed and they resent it. They aren't going to search for more. These folks are often near the breaking point but they aren't masochists. Of course it would be better to identify a child as angered before he becomes bi-polar. It just isn't going to happen often or easily. It tells you a lot about a parent who can, eventually, handle the possibility.

I think the problem of blame accounts for, in part, the huge growth in psychiatric labeling. Before World War II, we didn't have much of it. Now we trip over categories in the dark, they are so abundant. I know they are promoted as scientific and sometimes the statistics are impressive. But they all happen within a cultural context. The culture continues to evolve. We continue to develop lots of labels for identifying unhappiness. Is the Spike of 21st century America the Spike of colonial America? Not by a long shot.

Anyway, categories whether they are accurate reflections of a kid's problems or not do afford parents a way to side-step their own roles. I'm not suggesting that any individual parents are at fault. They may or may not be. I don't care. I don't try to find out. I do know that living with Spike will turn you into an enabler of the behavior you say you don't want, however it got started.

Tyler: How can parents determine whether they have an angry child, and if they need outside help?

Andrew: By the time a parent comes to me, they have been in the mental health network often for several years. They have participated in every program that they know about. Nothing has worked. I do not take histories in my private practice. They don't predict anything about competence in completing the program. So I often don't know what brought a parent to take his/her kid to the local mental health clinic. All I know is that the kid is out of control, home life is hell and it has been going on for a while.

Out of control means what it says: a parent can do little or nothing in the name of reward or punishment that makes any difference in the kid's behavior. Attempts at punishment provoke opposition; attempts at reward just stimulate entitlement. Spinning your wheels is more productive.

This is the point where many parents give up. They shouldn't. They have options left. The biggest one is that they can take over and create the change they hoped their child would create.

Tyler: Andrew, can you explain further what you mean by the parents being able to “create the change they hoped their child would create”? After the child has been angry for so long, how are they going to create a change the angry child will actually respond to? Isn't the child past the point of listening to his or her parents at this point?

Andrew: The miserable kid is the target of services because he or she is miserable. He is the brat (or worse). He is the one who gets in trouble. He is the one who is impossible to live with. Seems straightforward. We don't look at misery as a problem of context. We should because context can help. The context is family dynamics, especially the dynamics of the parent and child. In the past, talking about those dynamics in a family therapy setting has been the best practice. But what if Spike won't participate? What if he isn't willing to talk it out?

We want the miserable kid to change to make himself and us happy. It probably isn't going to happen. But that doesn't prevent us from trying, again and again. When it finally occurs to us that Spike isn't going to budge behaviorally, our fall back is to engage in training that makes us, his parents, the centerpiece of change, rather than him. Either that or give up. The former is a better idea. We can make a lot of progress and do it a lot faster than Spike can.

But PACT isn't therapy. It is management. PACT can take care of about fifty percent of the maladjustment problem. The other fifty percent is up to Spike to take care of. Once we get out of the way, he probably will, in his own time and in his own way. Therapy can be part of his fifty percent. We hope it will.

And will Spike listen? Not to anything his parents have to say which is why we cut out most verbalization. You will, instead, model the behavior you want him to display. You will do so consistently regardless of what happens. As he starts to believe that you are serious, he will adjust.

Tyler: What is the purpose of “Got An Angry Kid?” Is it a resource in itself, or a guide to resources for parents with angry children?

Andrew: “Got an Angry Kid?” is a stand-alone resource. Often parents report that they do not need follow up services once PACT has concluded. PACT is, importantly, not therapy. I encourage all of my clients to be in therapy. PACT is all about management. Successful management means that symptoms have diminished significantly making it far easier for the kid to concentrate on doing what is right for himself, rather than fighting.

Tyler: Can you give us a list of some of the behaviors a parent would notice that would make a child appear angry? You mentioned beating on the parents. What are some other forms of anger you've seen parents deal with?

Andrew: Well, as mentioned earlier, physical violence or the threat of violence is common. Then there is disrespect, especially in public. There are few things more humiliating than having your child disrespect you in public. It takes real strength of character, not to mention a healthy respect for the law, to resist leaping on that kid and throttling him. Then we have disobedience. Lying. Stealing. Throwing tantrums. Beating up on siblings. Causing the school to make angered phone calls. That sort of thing.

As a foot note to this is the police. Parents often call the police on their child thinking that the police will scare the kid. It generally doesn't work and the parents get a humiliating lecture on parenting.

And, they get the lecture in front of the kid. In most jurisdictions, no arrest will be made unless someone has been attacked and, it is common that if it is the parent who is attacked, nothing will happen. Parents often have to learn this the hard way. My advice is, don't call the cops unless the situation becomes dangerous. All of the above, by the way, disappears by the end of PACT training in most instances.

Tyler: Can you provide us some understanding into why children become angry and act out in certain ways that are not acceptable within a family?

Andrew: The list of things we can do intentionally and unintentionally to drive a kid to a state of permanent anger is long. Make him feel unstable. Make him feel abandoned. Make him feel worthless. These ingredients are generally unintentional: say, a young family who has money troubles and who is absorbed with survival. The parents may be distracted by the sheer necessity of making each day work. They are short-tempered and unavailable to their kids. The parents probably fight in front of the kids. Some kids will react to this because they take it personally. It really has nothing to do with the kid, as such. The kid doesn't know that. He thinks he is being rejected.

Tyler: Doesn't environment and peers affect the anger? For example, when you talked about the parents trying to survive above, I would think a cause of anger might be if the child's friend gets the newest video game, but the child's parents can't afford to buy it for him. Or in a more extreme case, a child has friends engaged in unacceptable behavior, such as smoking cigarettes, so the child decides to rebel against his parents by following his friend's behavior. What should parents do in such a situation, and to what extent should they try to control their child's interaction with other children?

Andrew: We have already established that Spike can't be controlled. This is hard for some parents to swallow but it is true. He will hang with anyone he wants and anything we attempt to do about it will backfire. If he wants a video game, he will steal it. If he wants to smoke, he will smoke. Everything he does is unacceptable which is why he does it. He knows you have no authority, and he dares you to pretend you do so he can laugh at you. The issue isn't the environment of his buddies, though their effect on him isn't positive. The issue is your effect on him. Forget blaming others. Blame is a distraction.

Tyler: Andrew, how does anger vary depending on the age of the child, or the child's cultural, socio-economic background?

Andrew: Anger is anger. Perhaps the biggest different is that it hurts more to be hit by a seventeen-year old than it does by a seven-year old. That's it in a nutshell. Culture is irrelevant. You may say to me, "But I'm Italian! Yelling is what we do." And my response is, "Are all Italians maladjusted?" PACT is composed of twenty-eight behaviors that need to be removed from the parental repertoire regardless of culture. They appear to be universals.

When I created the program twenty-five years ago, I started with twenty-six steps. Twenty-five years later, I have twenty-eight. I got it just about right in the first place. Many clients have been from differing cultures. The culture argument doesn't work. Economic status is also irrelevant. There is a supposition that if you are poor that you are even more incompetent than the rest of us. Not true. Poor people love their kids just as much as anyone. That being said, PACT has traditionally served middle and upper middle class families as these families are more aware of resources available to them, not because they care more.

Tyler: What about gender? Am I wrong in assuming that anger, especially in the form of violence, is more typical with boys than girls?

Andrew: Gender used to predict. That was back in the day. Angry girls tended to expressed their anger as depression. Aggression is much more evenly distributed across the genders now.

Tyler: Divorce is a major factor in upsetting children. What can a divorced parent do to help an angry child?

Andrew: Divorce is a big driver of referrals to the program. There is an abundance of anger all over the place to work with. But PACT can be especially useful in a divorce situation. The parent who will undertake PACT training is likely to look much more competent in the eyes of the judge who is making decisions about custody. The participating parent will come off as calm; the non-participating parent will come off as out of control. Who would you place a child with?

Tyler: In the book, you use a child named “Spike” to illustrate your examples. Will you tell us a little about Spike as a character?

Andrew: Spike is a fictitious amalgam of every miserably unhappy child whose parents have ever found themselves in PACT Training. He is hell to live with. He controls the household. He forces everyone to dance around his misbehavior. His prognosis is very poor. If his parents care enough to learn PACT, they can have a remarkably different child. The process will take a while, and it will involve developing a discipline parents didn't know they needed. It boils down to how badly do parents want to pull their kid back from the brink. Not all do, by the way though they all say they do.

Tyler: Andrew, you became interested in helping angry children based on some of your personal experiences, if I'm not mistaken. Will you tell us a little about your background in that regard?

Andrew: I have had a set of experiences similar to those of Spike. Having lived through it all, I am in a good position to tell parents that life is not over and that the psychiatric label pinned on your kid can be temporary. Clients respond well to a provider who has walked in their shoes. It happens rarely.

Tyler: Will you tell us about how you developed your training called Parenting Angry Children and Teens (PACT)?

Andrew: I developed PACT in the midst of real need. My own Spike was getting dangerously worse. Something had to happen. I didn't know what. Most parents don't. Nothing like PACT existed. I acted on a hunch and what I figured out became PACT. Before long the Connecticut State Department of Children and Families experimented with it and liked what they saw and invited me to create an agency. I did. That was about eighteen years ago.

Tyler: How is PACT training structured and how long does it take?

Andrew: PACT consists of twenty-eight steps. The steps are all about resisting provocation, not engaging it. Parents learn to back away from a situation they cannot control anyway. They learn that everything they have been doing in the name of parenting has just served to enable the behavior they say they don't want. So they stop doing it, piece by piece. It is a revelation. They don't begin the program with any more confidence than they began anything else. But, in about eight weeks, lights begin to go on. They generally see enough change in their child to convince them that what they are doing will work. But there are no short cuts. Don't think you can reduce this to PACT-lite and you will get anywhere. It takes about a year to get through the program for good reason. Don't post-pone starting either.

Tyler: Andrew you mentioned above how parents with angry children end up dancing around the child's behaviors, and you with your own angry child had to figure out what to do and happened to figure it out correctly. Will you tell us what the first step of the program is to turning this kind of a situation around?

Andrew: 'No yelling.' Actually, it is worse than that: it is 'No Being Heard In The Next Room.' We want to calm you down. That comes first. We don't go to the next goal until you have that one down cold. You cannot yell in anger or in convenience. It is all yelling. You can't yell out the back door. You can't yell at soccer games. After the program is over, you can yell all you want, but you probably won't much other than, say, at soccer games.

Tyler: Does a parent have to attend the training physically, or is the information provided in "Got an Angry Kid?" sufficient?

Andrew: I give many lectures and workshops. They are helpful in orienting potential clients and professionals. But they are unnecessary. Just jump in and do the program. The book contains it all. It is true we all learn better with a coach, trainer or teacher. Were that not the case, we'd all get our degrees by correspondence. Still, the book is written in a way that disciplined parents can do this by themselves.

Tyler: Would you tell us briefly how the book is organized? I understand at least part of it is a workbook?

Andrew: The book cleverly comes in two parts: Part One is mostly about Spike and his family. He is a device to get you to identify with the concept of the program. Part Two is the literal program. There are charts in the appendix for you to keep track of your progress and to keep track of target behaviors that we want the kid to give up.

Tyler: What kinds of responses and feedback have you received from parents as a result of PACT training, and have you received any feedback from the children themselves?

Andrew: Parents love the experience. It is very rewarding for me, too. The screening devices found in the book are so good, that most everyone who is screened into the program does well. I don't hear a lot from kids. They don't participate. In fact, parents are told not to share what they are learning with their kid unless they want their kid to destroy their progress. Kids sometimes resent me at first (so I am told) as I am changing the dynamics of the household. These kids do not want to give up control. But, control is taken from them anyway. In time, they see me as someone who comes into their home weekly who concentrates on their parents, which they find wonderful since everything was always about them in the past. They appreciate the break.

Tyler: Andrew, what would you say is the one, most fundamental thing to understand about an angry child?

Andrew: I don't care how terrible the kid, you can probably change him or her. There is abundant reason for hope.

Tyler: And what would you say is one thing a parent can do right away to help improve the situation with an angry child?

Andrew: Stop responding to provocation. You are just making it worse.

Tyler: Thank you for the opportunity to interview you today, Andrew. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information can be found there about “Got An Angry Kid? Parenting Spike: A Seriously Difficult Child”?

Andrew: The site www.DrAGibson.com is new and is quite exciting. It was designed by a very clever graphic artist. I encourage everyone to look at it. There is much more information about PACT there than I shared here such as who can and can't do the program and frequently asked questions. I think you will enjoy it. Let me toss in one final thought: Don't wait for your kid to become Spike before you get serious about how you interact with him. Time is precious. Childhoods are short.

Tyler: I would add, Andrew, that readers can also watch a short video on your website, including you talking about the book and a testimonial with parents you've helped. Thank you again, Andrew, for joining me today. I hope “Got An Angry Kid?” helps to heal many parent-child relationships.

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