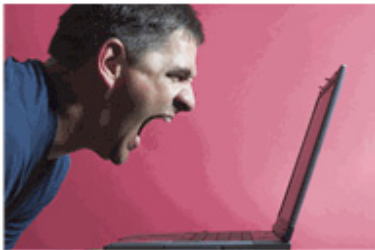


Emailing Angry ~ Think Before You Hit Send

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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How many of you have sent an email that made your problem with someone bigger rather than better? Or that created a problem that you hadn't had before?

A friend of mine who is a psychologist specializing in conflict resolution says that much of her work is now the result of conflicts caused by email communications. Email is enormously convenient, but not always reliable. The lack of information available through tone of voice and the

speed without the opportunity for immediate clarification create the risk of unnecessary misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Tone of voice can make written words sound amazingly different, so it's worth getting clarification before assuming that someone is being insulting. Once, I got furious at my brother about an email he sent me. I felt that he didn't appreciate me at all. When I finally called him, my brother read his message to me. To my astonishment and chagrin for having been so mad at him, the same words sounded completely kind with his inflections and had a totally different meaning when he read them aloud!

The immediacy of email leads to many of us writing in shorthand, assuming the other person will understand what we mean. We might feel very strongly in the moment, and our feelings may change with some reflection to gain perspective. The problem is that, once a message is sent, it is not possible to get it back again – and the written word has a permanence to it: the recipient can look at the message over and over again, getting more and more upset or confused.

To help prevent email communication problems, senior instructor Erika Leonard added a new use for the Kidpower technique called Hands Down Power, usually used to help our students of any age stop themselves from hitting someone or from touching something they shouldn't.

In her workshops, Erika asks adults to imagine that they are at the computer and feeling angry as they are

about to write an email. She asks people to notice how their bodies feel when they are upset, unhappy, angry, hurt, urgent or righteous - perhaps their muscles are tense, perhaps their breathing is shallow, maybe their jaws are clenched, or maybe they think they don't feel anything except cool and analytical.

Next, Erika asks her students to put their hands in the air in front of themselves, as if they are at the keyboard getting ready to write their message. Erika tells everyone enthusiastically, "This is a time when you step **away** from the technology and use Hands Down Power!" She demonstrates at the same time by backing up and moving her hands from her own imaginary keyboard down to her sides. "Wait a few hours before sending that message in order to get some perspective. If you are still unhappy, call this person to talk things over!"

Despite our unhappy feelings with someone in the moment, most of us want to create more peace and understanding in our own lives and in the lives of the people around us. When we feel urgent about sending a message because the other person "deserves" it or doesn't understand, we are probably triggered. Our waiting, gaining perspective, and thinking about our choices will probably do more to prevent and solve problems than our doing anything right away.

Sometimes we might tell ourselves that we are "too busy" to make a phone call and send an email instead as a way of avoiding having to deal with a person directly. Sometimes we might vent by e-mail and write things that we would never say to someone in person.

Thinking carefully about where and how we vent and speaking to individuals directly instead of hiding behind email is likely to save both time and relationships in the long run.

For many years here at Kidpower, we have had an agreement to pick up the telephone and **talk** to each other before we get upset by something someone wrote in an email - and also to call and speak directly to someone if we need to say something that this individual is not going to like.

Of course, sometimes we don't have the choice of calling. In these cases, remember that anger, sarcasm, irritation or humor can be easily misunderstood and negativity can be magnified far beyond anything intended by the writer. I will often tell people to hear my tone as being "caring" or "humorous" or "slightly frustrated but not angry" in order to give them a context for my words.

Email can be a wonderful tool for building community and sharing ideas. Like any tool, email can be misused. Remembering to take charge of email safety, especially when we are unhappy or upset, is important in improving communications in today's world.