

Aggressive Behavior Should be Curbed Early

by Dean Walker

In the sandbox at the park, I watch a turf war erupt between two 3-year-old girls. First screams, then handfuls of sand fly between the two until each is dragged to a neutral corner by an embarrassed adult.

“Aggressive behavior is common and normal in younger children,” says Dr. Chris Stout, chief of psychology at Forest Hospital in Chicago, Illinois.

Stout, who specializes in working with aggressive children, explains, “Up until the age of 6 or 7 years, children’s brains have not developed to the point that they can stop that impulse to hit, kick, or grab. They may be able to tell you exactly what behavior would be more acceptable, such as using words, but when the heat is on, typically, the gloves come off.”

While aggressive behavior is normal, Dr. Stout and other psychologists agree it is not wise to let even very small children think it is acceptable. Here’s what parents can do.

- **Model self control.**

When children resort to aggressive behavior, parents can reign in their own anger and use words to redirect them. “Kids learn a lot watching their parents,” says Stout. “Stay calm when intervening in children’s misbehavior to show them the appropriate way to interact with others.”

Instead of shouting, Dr. Carla Ford, director of The Center for Young Children at the University of Maryland, suggests that parents use an I-message. For example, if you come into the room and find one of your children hitting the other, use a firm, controlled voice and say, “Jane, I feel angry when I see you hitting your brother because I’m afraid you will hurt him. I want you to use words.” The I-message follows a simple formula: “I feel...when you...because...I want you to....”

- **Set limits on aggressive behavior.**

Stout suggests this simple household rule: “We do not hurt people in this house.” The consequences for breaking the rule should be clear. A short time-out is usually most effective. Say to the child, “We do not hurt people. You need to be away from others until you are ready to stop.” Firmly direct the child to the time-out area, using physical assistance (hand holding or carrying) only if the child will not go alone.

- **Stay away from physical punishment.**

It’s tempting to spank children when they become aggressive, but it’s not the best approach according to Dr. Craig Hart, researcher at Louisiana State University. “Although using an aggressive discipline method is often quicker than an explanation, there can be long-term consequences to such shortcuts.” Research by Dr. Hart indicates that a child accustomed to physical punishment tends to think that aggressive solutions work best.

- **Don't reward tantrums.**

This classic behavior is best ignored. "The child who has a tantrum in the supermarket and is quieted with a treat from a stressed and embarrassed parent has just been given a lesson about the benefits of throwing a tantrum," warns Dr. John Coie, professor of psychology at Duke University in North Carolina.

You don't have to punish children from having a tantrum, just make sure they receive no reward for it. A parent might say to a child who is having a tantrum, "I can see that you're really upset about not getting the toy you want." Then go about business without paying more attention to the tantrum. If the child starts to hit, say, "We will need to go to the car now, until I'm sure you can be around other people without hurting them."

If a child continues to have tantrums in spite of efforts to ignore them, parents can arrange an outing for training purposes. Tell the child. "You will not be able to go to the store with me, because I don't want to deal with your tantrums. You will stay with Grandma (or a neighbor, or a sitter) until I am done. You can try coming to the store with me next time."

- **Allow anger, not aggression.**

"Anger is an emotion that gives people a signal that some action is hurtful to them, or that some issue needs to be addressed," Stout says. "We need to make sure that consequences are given for aggressive behavior, not for angry feelings."

- For example, Joe may stomp into the house and say, "I can't stand that Jimmy! He never lets me have a turn on the bike!" The parent might say, "You're really mad at Jimmy!" If Joe goes back outside and punches Jimmy, the parent has the opportunity to make clear the difference between anger and aggression. "I know you're angry with Jimmy, and that's okay. But you may not hurt people. Go inside until you're ready to stop hurting."

- **Take time to train.**

"It pays to take a few minutes to train children to use nonaggressive strategies," Ford says. When Joe has cooled down after his short time-out for hitting Jimmy, the parent can ask, "What do you think might have worked better than hitting when you got so mad at Jimmy?" Help the child explore one or two nonviolent options.

- **Notice your child's progress.**

"We need to let children know that we appreciate it when they use nonaggressive behavior in tense situations," Ford says. Joe's parent might have helped him avoid the aggressive episode by noticing Joe's initial restraint. "You're really mad at Jimmy. I'm glad you're using words to show how angry you are." This kind of positive feedback makes it more likely the child will use words next time, too.

When push comes to shove at home, in the park, or in the supermarket, parents don't have to find themselves reeling with the punches. With planning and practice, we can learn to draw the line at aggressive behavior without stepping over it ourselves.

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Original publication date: 11/27/1995 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon