

# Fighting Aggression

September 2009



**Children don't learn to tame their aggressive instincts naturally. They need to be taught. Here's how you can help:**

**Lay down the law:** When the opportunity arises – a character on a TV show hits another, you see children fighting or your child takes an angry swing at you – make it clear that the use of physical force when you are angry, to settle a dispute or to get what you want, is unacceptable and that harming another person is wrong (“We do *not* hit other people!”). This message will take many repetitions to get through, but eventually your child will come to accept it as gospel.

**Avoid a heavy hand:** It's tempting to drag a reluctant-to-leave toddler out of a sandbox, give a sidewalk dawdler a little push when you are late for an appointment, or deliver a quick smack of retribution for kicking a playmate, but such tactics breed toddlers who also get heavy-handed when angry or under stress. Try, instead, to handle your toddler in a firm but gentle way, even when you are annoyed or impatient.

**Opt for middle-of-the-road discipline:** The most aggressive children usually have the most aggressive and punitive parents or push-over parents who don't discipline them at all. Discourage aggressive behavior by avoiding these extremes. If you have an aggressive child, it's particularly important to set limits and supply structure, while providing plenty of opportunity for your child to make choices.

**Pay attention to good behavior:** Hitting, biting and other aggressive behaviors are often calls for attention by children who are frequently ignored or underappreciated when they're behaving well. A child who feels he or she isn't getting enough attention may do anything to get it, including beating up on playmates. Give plenty of attention (praise, smiles, hugs) for good behavior and very little (other than stopping the behavior and disciplining appropriately but matter-of-factly) for bad.

**Validate your child's feelings:** All feelings, unlike some actions, are okay. Acknowledge that it's okay to feel angry when you don't get your way or when a friend grabs a toy from you, but it's not okay to hit.

**Encourage translating feelings into words:** Anger. Disappointment. Jealousy. Sorrow. Fear. Eventually children should learn to express these and other feelings with words rather than through aggressive actions.

**Provide opportunities for venting:** Pent-up frustration, energy, or anger can explode in aggressive behavior or be released through a variety of appropriate outlets. Teaching your child to express feelings in safe, healthy ways will help lessen his or her needs to indulge in physical outbursts.

**Recognize when your toddler has had it:** At any age, a tired child can behave irritably. During the toddler years, when irritability reigns even under the best of circumstances, fatigue almost always robs reason. Determine the time of day that your child tends to be overtired (for most toddlers, this is late afternoon and early evening) and avoid play dates during those times or monitor them closely.

**Banish boredom:** Idle toddlers can do major mischief. Anticipate your toddler's ennui whenever possible, and respond with a challenging game or activity before hellish behavior breaks loose.

**Minimize frustrations:** Much of the aggressive behavior of toddlers is related to frustration. Helping your toddler to learn the skills needed for everyday living – social skills, dressing skills, playing skills, eating skills – may reduce not only frustration but aggression.

**Diffuse with soothing activities:** Take breaks each day (especially during high-stress- times) for quiet cuddling, singing, reading and other pacifying past times; these can help diffuse a toddler's aggression. The other plus: They're relaxing for you, too.

**Set a nonaggressive example:** If, over time, your toddler sees you handle your disagreements maturely, using words instead of actions, compromise instead of confrontation, he or she will be likely to learn to respond the same way. Whenever you can't manage to be a model example – when you lose your temper with your spouse, a friend or your child – make sure your toddler sees you admit your lapse and apologize for it, too.

**Know when to stay out of it:** A few harmless rounds of pushing and shoving aren't likely to hurt anyone and don't require adult intervention. Step in when you're not needed and you're depriving the children involved of valuable social experience. In such situations, they are learning through experience how relationships work, how to make them work, and what happens when they don't work. If frustrations are building faster than social skills, however, you can try a little lesson in negotiation and compromise. If, for example, two children are fighting over a truck, you can bring over another truck, keeping both parties happy. Or if the dispute is over the one and only riding toy in the house, you can recommend 'taking turns'. If the children refuse to compromise, impose a settlement: 'If you can't take turns, I have to put the tricycle away'. Then propose a fun, adult-supervised alternative activity.

**Know when to step into it:** If a confrontation escalates into outright violence (with hitting, biting or pinching), or it's clear that someone is going to get hurt, step in and stop it promptly. Focus your immediate attention in rescuing (and if need be, comforting) the victim rather than admonishing the perpetrator. If your child was the attacker, distract the victim with another activity, and take your toddler aside. Calmly, and without anger, explain *briefly* that the behaviour – whether it was hitting, biting, punching, kicking, pinching, or pushing – is not acceptable, and why. ('You hurt Patrick when you kicked him'). You can warn of consequences if the behavior is repeated ('you'll have to sit next to me on the bench for a time-out,' or 'we'll have to go home'), but avoid such threats unless you intend to follow through – or your attempts at modifying your toddler's behaviour will be futile.

**Don't take side:** Some parents tend to take side with their offspring during battles with other children, others side with the playmate, and still others try to ascertain who threw the first punch. Though all these parents have good intentions, none of these positions are best. It's unfair to always take one side or the other. And assigning blame when toddlers fight is tricky, since both parties always consider themselves in the right and the first punch you see may not have been the first thrown. So, even when intervention is called for, you should play mediator rather than defender or judge and jury. It doesn't matter who started the fray, it's up to you to see that it is brought to an end.

**Don't commence hostilities of your own:** Losing control is frightening enough for a toddler without having to face a scolding – or worse yet, a smack – by a large, loved authority figure. Bullying your child into obeying creates a bully role model to emulate.

**Skip the lecture:** It's important to let a toddler know it is wrong to hurt others and to use brute force to resolve conflicts. But droning on and on after a belligerent play date ('you didn't play nicely at all... You were so mean to your friend... Your friends won't like you anymore if you're so mean') or coaching him for half an hour before a play date ('Now, don't forget not to push. Make sure you share. No hitting or biting') isn't likely to change a child's behaviour. In fact, such lectures may cause a toddler to tune out, may increase his inner anger and thus aggressiveness, or, by 'rewarding' negative behavior with attention, may encourage more of the same.

**Change the pace:** When aggressive behavior breaks out, peace can often be restored by switching to a parent-supervised activity (such as snack-making, painting, or a circle game) or otherwise redirecting both parties' attention elsewhere. Regularly interspersing parent-supervised activity with one-on-one play often prevents fighting by ending free-play sessions before the players have reached their limits of good behaviour.

**Always supervise:** Even the best-behaved children sometimes get physical with their peers. So, all toddler play sessions should be closely supervised!