

Hitting, Biting and Kicking: How to Stop Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

by *Dr. Joan Simeo Munson*

"I'm not allowed to bring Ben to play group anymore," said Sarah, whose son is now five years old. "The last time we went, he bit another boy who was playing with a truck Ben wanted. And the time before that, he hit a little girl across the face. I try to tell him 'no' but he just doesn't listen, so I just end up apologizing for him. I'm starting to feel like the world's worst parent because I can't control him when he acts out."

"It's easy to respond to your child's aggression with yelling or anger, but remember, your child is looking to you for cues on how to control his impulses and have good behavior."

As parents, few situations are more difficult to deal with than having a child who is aggressive toward other children. It can be embarrassing as well as frightening when your child bites, hits, scratches or kicks to get his or her way. It's not uncommon for younger children to engage in this type of behavior at various points in their development and in a variety of settings. However, when it becomes very frequent or seems to be their consistent way of reacting to something they don't like, it's time to step in and help them change their behavior.

The first step is understanding the underlying reasons why your child is choosing to act out this way. The more you understand what's happening, the better you'll be able to help them find other, non-aggressive ways to solve their problems.

Initially, between the ages of 18 months to 2 years, children find it extremely hard to communicate their needs to their parents, caregivers, and other children. Negative behaviors are one way they may choose to get their point across. For older children between the ages of three and six, such behaviors may be the result of never having learned appropriate, non-aggressive ways of communicating when they were faced with a difficult situation. The cause of aggressive behaviors may be due to any or all of the following:

- Self-defense
- Being placed in a stressful situation
- Lack of routine
- Extreme frustration or anger
- Inadequate speech development
- Over-stimulation
- Exhaustion
- Lack of adult supervision
- Mirroring the aggressive behaviors of other children around them

One place to begin is to watch your child for cues to see if any of the situations described above brings about aggressive behavior. Learning as much as you can about the factors that trigger bad behavior is the best way to combat it when it occurs next time. Some questions you should ask yourself:

- Who does my child hit, bite or kick? Does he do it to one friend in particular? Does he only do it to me? Or does he tend to be aggressive with whomever he is with? If it's one person in particular, try to find out if there's a reason why he's attacking that child such as engaging in overly aggressive play, a poor match of temperaments or a lack of clear cut rules before play begins.
- Also, what seems to cause your child to act out in an aggressive fashion? Is it triggered by frustration, anger, or excitement? Notice if there are patterns. Does he act this way when toys are involved, and he's frustrated about sharing? Or does he become aggressive when there is too much going on and he's over-stimulated? If you observe the situations carefully, you will likely notice patterns.
- Finally, how is his aggressiveness expressed? Is it through angry words or through angry behaviors? Does he become verbally aggressive first and then physically aggressive, or is his first response to strike out and hit?

By answering these questions, you are on your way to successfully limiting your child's aggressive behavior in the future. In this article, I'll outline some ways that you can help your child become more aware of his aggressive feelings and teach him to calm himself down, or find alternative ways to solve his problems. We'll also talk about giving consequences to kids when they do lash out and hurt someone.

In my experience, consequences are imperative to ending aggressive behavior in young children. They teach your child that all behaviors have a consequence, whether good or bad, and will help him make better choices in the future when he is with his friends. Once you've narrowed down the reasons why your child is behaving aggressively, it's time to intervene.

Step in and Stop it Immediately

At the first sign that your child is about to become aggressive, immediately step in and remove him from the situation. Be careful not to give too much attention to your child so that you do not give any negative reinforcement for the bad behavior. Too much attention can include trying to "talk through" the problem. Young children are not able to hear long explanations of why their behavior was offensive. A simple yet firm statement such as, "We don't bite" should suffice while you turn your attention to the victim.

Other examples of too much attention include yelling at your child while attending to the victim, forcing your child to apologize immediately or continuing to talk to the other parents around you about how embarrassed or angry you are. Make a point of consoling the victim and ignoring the aggressor.

If your child cannot calm down, remove him or her from the situation without getting angry yourself. When they are calm and ready to talk, you can discuss what happened. If it's physically impossible to remove your child, you will have to remove yourself and the victim from the situation. By walking an

age-appropriate distance away from your child after he has acted out, you are sending the message that you will attend to him when he can calm down. In doing so, you are teaching your child that it is his responsibility to learn to calm himself and act appropriately.

Lower Your Voice—Don't Raise It

As parents, we need to show self-control and use gentle words if we want our kids to do the same. It's easy to respond with yelling or anger, but remember, your child is looking to you for cues on how to control his impulses and have good behavior. While it can be terribly embarrassing to have a child that continues to act out towards their friends, keep in mind that their negative behavior is most likely happening because they are still navigating their way through their social circles. This can be very difficult for some kids, so try not to over-react or personalize it.

One technique that works very well for some children is to change the tone and volume of your voice. You can help your child stay calm by immediately lowering your voice when attending to the victim as well as to your child. If he is unable to calm down, before helping the victim, turn to him and say quietly, "I need you to calm down now. I am going to help Josh and when I am done I want you to be done screaming." For some kids this will work, and when your child returns to you, calm and collected, feel free to quietly praise him, saying, "Thank you for calming yourself down. We don't bite. It hurt Josh and he is sad." Repeat the phrase "We don't bite" and inform your child that if it happens again, the consequence is that you will leave. If this does not work for your child and he simply cannot calm down, leave him where he is (again, at an age-appropriate distance) and ignore the tantrum. Most young children will not continue to act out if they no longer have an audience.

Practice Ways to Defuse your Child's Anger

For younger kids, help them recognize their anger by stating, "I know you're mad, but we don't hit. No hitting!" For children aged 3-7, talk about anger as an important feeling. You can practice ways to defuse your child's anger during calmer moments. You can say, "Sometimes I get angry too. When that happens, I say 'I'm angry' and I leave the room." You can also teach your child how to count to ten until he is less angry, how to do deep breathing in order to calm down, or how to use his words by making statements such as "I am really, really angry right now!" All of these methods help take the immediate focus off of your child's anger and teach them to recognize this important emotion.

Before you enter into a potentially difficult social situation, review the consequences with your child about what will happen if he cannot control his anger. Tell your child, "I feel you can handle your anger, but if you can't, we will have to leave the park and not come back until next week. Do you understand?" Make certain that you follow through with whatever consequences you pose to your child.

Teach Kids that Aggression is Wrong

It's also important to talk to your children about aggression during a calm moment. In a steady voice, explain to your child that hitting, biting, kicking, and other aggressive behaviors are wrong. For younger children, those between 18 months and 2 years, keep it simple. Hold them and explain, "No

hitting. It is wrong." Remember that you may have to repeat this rule numerous times, using the same words, until your child gets it. Be firm and consistent each time your child becomes aggressive. Have a plan in place for consequences if aggressive behavior starts. At home, this can include a time-out chair away from the rest of the family where your child can stay until he can calm down. If you are away from home, pick a safe place, such as a time-out in a car seat or another place where your child is removed from the fun. This reinforces that you are not tolerating aggression in any form.

For older children, those between 3 and 7, remember that they may be experimenting with cause and effect. In other words, they want to see what you will do when they act out. It's your job to provide the consequences for the "effect" to work. Since older children are more verbal, you can use a variety of phrases when they misbehave. Examples include, "Biting is not OK," or "Hitting hurts others. You need to stop." It is okay to tell your little biter/hitter/kicker that once he misbehaves, he's lost a privilege for the day. Consequences can include leaving a play date immediately or losing video time.

Tell Your Child to "Use Your Words"

Many times kids who display aggressive behaviors simply lack the communication skills necessary to help them through a stressful situation. For a young child, biting or hitting someone is a whole lot easier! Plus, aggressive behaviors often give children a false sense of power over their peers. It's up to you to work diligently with your child so that he or she can practice the art of diplomacy in a tough situation. Help your child find their voice when they feel like acting out. By explaining and then practicing using their words, you are helping them to trade off aggressive behavior in favor of more socially acceptable behavior. Some examples are:

- Teach your child to say "No!" to their peers instead of acting aggressively. Too often a child reacts negatively to a friend or sibling instead of asserting themselves. By using the simple word "no," you are helping your child to get his point across verbally, not aggressively.
- Give your child a series of phrases to use with their friends when they are feeling angry or frustrated. Some examples are, "No, that's mine," "I don't like that!" or "Stop! That hurts." This helps your child substitute words for striking out.

Before you enter a situation that you know may cause your child to act aggressively (i.e., a play date or daycare) remind your child to "Use your words." Repeat this to your child throughout the course of the week when you feel they are getting frustrated.

Recognize Your Child's Limitations

This means knowing when to leave a potentially volatile situation or choosing to engage your child in a different activity to avoid aggressive confrontations. If you know that your child targets a particular child at play group, you may have to hold off going to play group for a few weeks until he learns to control himself. Or, if certain videos, games, or activities frustrate your child, remove them from your daily routine to see if this has a placating effect on your child's behavior. Finally, if your child is exhausted, hungry, or over-stimulated, respect that and engage in low-key, slow-paced activities that

will make aggression less likely. With your older, more verbal child, talk openly about situations that make him angry and work together to come up with solutions to help him through the problem next time.

Be Appreciative of their Efforts

When you catch your child being good, be sure to praise their hard work and efforts. For instance, if you observe your children in a power struggle over a toy that ends in them working it out peacefully with their friend, tell them how proud you are that they chose to use their words instead of resorting to aggression to get their way. Look for and continue to praise good behavior as a way to motivate your children to do better next time.

What Not to Do

- Never bite or hit back. It can be tempting to want to teach your child a lesson in how it feels to be the victim of aggression, but when you succumb to a childlike form of communication, you are teaching your child that aggression is the answer to resolving a conflict. Even though it's difficult, try your best to maintain your composure.
- Do not expose your child to violent television or video games. Too often TV and videos portray the most violent character as the hero, which sends the message that violence is a means to an end for problem-solving. This message can easily be avoided if you are on top of their viewing habits. While TV or video violence may not affect some kids, it may greatly influence others who have a tendency to act out aggressively with their friends. By knowing your child's temperament and what he or she can withstand, you are helping them on their way towards their best behavior possible.
- Do not personalize your child's bad behavior. All too often parents get frustrated and angry at their child when they are aggressive, because many times we feel that our child's poor behavior is a reflection of our parenting skills. If you have an aggressive child, switch your focus towards helping them express themselves in a more appropriate way and follow through when an incident occurs.

When Aggression is Extreme

While aggression can be normal in many children, you should be aware of when your child's behavior has gone beyond the scope of what is considered within the normal boundaries for their developmental level. Look for the following signs in your child:

- A pattern of defiant, disobedient, or hostile behavior towards you or other authority figures such as teachers or day care providers. A pattern means behavior that is not fleeting, but is chronic and does not respond to the above interventions.
- Loses their temper easily
- Constantly argues with adults
- Deliberately engages in activities that knowingly annoy others
- Blames others
- Acts annoyed or is chronically touchy

- Exhibits ongoing anger
- Acts spiteful or vindictive

It is important to recognize that all young children may exhibit any or all of the above problems at some point during their development. However, if your child persistently displays these behaviors and it affects their daily functioning, such as their ability to behave at school or maintain friendships, contact your pediatrician, as it may indicate that they have other psychological problems that need attention. In this case, you will need to have your child evaluated by a mental health professional.

Parenting an aggressive child can be one of the greatest challenges you will face as you weave your way through the maze of his or her development. Even though it may seem like it at times, it's not impossible to teach your child new and appropriate ways to interact with other children and the adults around them. The key is developing a clear, uncomplicated, consistent plan and following it in a composed manner. Remember: the best example of appropriate behavior is you, and your young child is watching.