

AGGRESSION IN PRESCHOOLERS



PREPARED BY DR. KATE AUBREY
REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGIST

Seriously, anyone who has raised a preschooler knows **terrible doesn't stop at 2**. Physical aggression, such as pushing, kicking and biting, is still very common at this age, with hitting be the most common form of aggression.

Although development in language skills is the biggest reason that aggressive behaviours decline between toddlerhood and preschool, just because a child can talk does not mean she's able to problem-solve or attach the right words to what she's feeling.



Hitting, pushing, and kicking are natural and normal behaviours for children who do not always have the words or the skills to handle difficult situations. Toddlers and preschoolers will often respond physically to situations that upset them because they have not yet learned other ways to respond. **Here are some ideas for dealing with hitting in young children:**

STOP THE HITTING

The very first thing to do when your child hits is to try to stop it. While ignoring works well for reducing the frequency of many behaviours (such as meltdowns), hitting is not a behaviour I encourage parents to ignore. **As gently as possible**, take your child's hands and look her in the eye and explain in as few words as possible that "we do not hit." A child who is angry and lashing out is not likely to listen to a long explanation of why physical violence is wrong, so keep it simple.

Depending on the situation, it may also be necessary to **remove your child**. If she hit you or another child and is able to calm down immediately, then she does not need to be removed. However, if she continues to lash out, pick her up calmly and take her somewhere else. Unfortunately, this means you may have to leave playgrounds, stores, restaurants, and parties with your child. Sometimes children are not able to calm down until they are removed from the situation.

The other benefit of removing your child is that you aren't having to deal with the situation directly under the eyes of everyone else who was witnessing it. If you choose to discipline your children in public you might find yourself making choices based on what would look right rather than what is the best thing to do.

Finally, removing your child from a situation also does not reinforce the hitting behaviour. It teaches your child: if I hit, I have to leave. Removing your child as opposed to yelling at them or making repeated requests is a better way to deal with hitting.

TEACH EMPATHY

Empathy is very much a learned behaviour. Once your child has simmered down, explain what he did wrong. Start simply: "We don't hit [or pinch or bite], because hitting hurts." But, don't stop at what he can't do - tell him what he should do.

For example, let's say your son got in a scuffle with another child on the swing set. First, help him identify what he wanted by saying, "Did you want a turn on the swing?" Then, tell him the more appropriate thing to do than pushing, for example "May I have a turn, please?"

Even though it feels like you should make your child apologize on the spot, forced apologies are meaningless and you may miss the learning opportunity. You can apologize on your child's behalf and will sound more sincere, and set a good example, if it comes from you. Instead, you can build empathy by asking your child to think about what might make the hurt child feel better. Let your child know that if it happens again they will get a consequence. Perhaps you'll need to leave a playdate prematurely, for example. Assure your child that you'll try again another time, when she's ready to play nicely.

INCREASE EMOTION VOCABULARY

If a child is hitting or kicking, there is a reason that they are doing so. That doesn't mean that it is okay for them to hit, but it is important to validate their feelings. You don't need to do in the heat of the moment, because your child may not be ready to listen at that point. However, once things have settled down, you should make a point to talk to them and mirror their feelings back to them in words. Try to express what was making them angry and ensure that they know that you understand that. Help them to find words that they can use next time instead of hitting.

With non-verbal toddlers, it is hard to tell whether it is their lack of maturity or lack of words that is causing them to lash out. Sometimes kids are simply lacking the words to say "stop that" or "please move" or "can I play with you". Once we give them a few key phrases, regression usually decreases. With toddlers that are just learning to talk, it may be worth practicing phrases that they can use instead of hitting.

PLAN AHEAD

If aggression happens repeatedly around a certain issue, it can be easier to brainstorm specific solutions. If sharing toys is always a challenge, allow your child to set aside "special" things before the playdate. If turn-taking is a frequent problem, help her to set a timer, so that she and her friend can each get their fair amount of time. Be sure to ask your child for help in coming up with solutions too. It will teach her problem-solving skills, and he'll get better at having playdates.

Prevention can be especially helpful if you with biting. Biting really upsets parents and causes all kinds of problems in preschools and daycares, but it's really common. If you can pinpoint what's likely to set your child off, you can better manage the situation. Does biting tend to happen in larger groups of kids? Are overstimulating environments like birthday parties a problem for him? With strict supervision, you can ideally physically intervene before biting starts.

FIND HITTING ALTERNATIVES

Some kids hit because they don't know what else to do. They are angry or feel like they have been treated unfairly and don't know what to do about it, so they hit. Try to teach your child alternatives to hitting. This can include:

- **Using words:** Helping them to express their feelings and use words to solve problems instead of hitting people. Sometimes that is as simple as saying "no". However, if kids feel like "no" is never respected, then they are unlikely to feel like that is an appropriate option instead of hitting.
- **Walking away:** Teaching them that they can walk away when someone is treating them badly instead of lashing back at that person.
- **Getting emotions out:** If they do feel the need to react physically to their anger, give them options like stomping their feet or pounding their fists into a pillow.
- **Asking for help:** It is good for children to learn to solve their own problems and disputes. However, I rather kids ask for help with a difficult situation than have them resort to violence. So if they are having trouble with another kid, encourage them to ask you, a teacher or other trusted adult for help.

USE IMMEDIATE PRAISE

Reward your child for showing or imitating the appropriate behaviour. When your child is able to say use the phrases you teach them or touch you gently as opposed to hitting, provide them with plenty of enthusiastic and specific praise such as "You touched mom so nicely!" "Great job talking things out!"

NEVER HIT YOUR CHILD

This probably goes without saying, but hitting teaches hitting. It is difficult to teach a child not to hit if you are hitting them. A lot of parents seem to think it is okay to spank their child when the child isn't behaving the way they want them to, even if it isn't hard, but then they expect their child not to hit anyone. Or, parents respond to hitting with more hitting, which may appear to "work" in the moment, but in the long-term just teaches the idea that the person who can hit the hardest wins. Modelling gentle responses and teaching children how to handle difficult situations without resorting to hitting is the best thing you can do in the long-term to teach your child that physical violence is not only wrong and disrespectful, but also unnecessary.

BE PATIENT, DON'T STRESS

While a young child's aggression is understandably frustrating, in the vast majority of cases it's a normal and fleeting part of growing up. As your child becomes a better problem-solver, she will hit less. Once kindergarten starts, most kids are no longer hitting or stop quite quickly after beginning school.