

DEFINITION

Some aggressive behaviors that children experiment with are hitting, slapping, pinching, scratching, poking, hair pulling, biting, kicking, shoving, and knocking down. Since these behaviors are unacceptable in the adult world and potentially harmful, they should not be allowed between children.

Causes

Many children fight when they are angry. They do not like something another child did and they retaliate. They want something another child has and see force as the easiest way to get it. Most children try aggressive behaviors because they see this behavior in playmates or on television. If children get their way through hitting, it will only become more frequent. Occasionally children become excessively aggressive because they receive lots of spankings at home or witness spouse or sibling abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a rule.** "Do not hit because it hurts. We do not hurt people."
2. **For aggressive behavior give your child a brief time-out in a boring place.** Being in time-out helps a child learn to cool down (rather than blow up) when she is angry. When it looks as if your child might hurt someone, intervene immediately. Stop the behavior at the early threatening or shoving stage. Do not wait until the victim is hurt or screams. If a time-out does not seem to be effective, also take away your child's favorite toy or television time for the remainder of the day.
3. **Suggest acceptable ways to express anger.** In the long run you want your child to be able to verbalize her anger in a calm but assertive way. Encourage your child to come to you when she's angry and talk about it until she feels better. A second option is to teach your child to stop and count to 10 before doing anything about her anger. A third option is to help her learn to walk away from a bad situation. Giving your child a time-out is one way of teaching her to walk away from anger.

Younger children (less than 3 or 4 years old) with limited expressive language need time to develop these skills. When they are in time-out, don't be surprised if they pout, mutter to themselves, yell in their room, or pound on their door. If these physical outlets for anger are blocked, a more aggressive outburst may occur. As long as the behavior is not destructive, ignore it. Teaching your child how to control anger provides her with a valuable resource.
4. **Verbalize your child's feelings for her.** If your child can't talk about her anger, put it into words

for her: "I know that you feel angry." It is unrealistic to expect your child not to feel anger. You may need to make an understanding statement such as "You wish you could punch your brother, but we cannot hurt other people."

5. **Teach your child acceptable ways to get what she wants.** Teach her how to negotiate (ask for) what she wants, rather than taking it. Teach her how to take turns or how to trade one of her toys to gain use of another child's toy.
6. **Give special attention to the victim.** After putting your child in time-out, pick up the child who has been injured and give him extra sympathy and attention. It is especially helpful if you can rescue the victim before he is hurt. In your child's mind the attention she wanted is now being given to the other person and that should give her some "food for thought." If fighting is a pattern with certain playmates or siblings, be sure the "victim" isn't "setting up" the "perpetrator" to gain attention.
7. **Never hit your child for hitting someone else.** Hitting your child only teaches her that it is fine to hit if you are bigger. If your child tends to be aggressive it's critical to eliminate all physical punishment (such as spanking). You can use many other consequences (such as time-out) to teach your child right from wrong.
8. **Praise your child for friendly behavior.** Praise her for being nice to people, playing with age mates in a friendly way, sharing things, and helping other children. Remind your child that people like to be treated kindly, not hurt. Some children respond to a system of receiving a treat or a star on a chart for each day they go without any "hitting" type of behavior.
9. **Prevention.** Set a good example. Show self-control and verbal problem solving. Avoid playmates who often tease or other situations in which your child frequently gets into fights. When your child becomes tired or hungry, leave the play setting until these needs are met.



CALL OUR OFFICE

During regular hours if

- The aggressive behavior is very frequent.
- Your child has seriously hurt another child.
- Your child can't keep friends.
- Your child seems very angry.
- The misbehavior lasts more than 4 weeks with this approach.
- You have other questions or concerns.