



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

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Aggressive Behaviour

Aggressive behaviour at an early age can lead to problems later on. All children need a certain level of aggression. Without it they are likely to become targets for other children. If your child gets angry from time to time it is nothing to worry about either. After all we all get worked up now and then. Anger and aggression start to become problems when a child attacks another child or adult. This is likely to be shown by biting and hitting.



There are three main causes of aggression in children. These are frustration, attention seeking and being territorial.

Frustration can have a number of triggers. For example it can be caused when a child has been told it is time to stop playing, to carry out an activity they do not wish to do or when they cannot have something they want.

Likewise there can be different triggers for attention seeking. An example of this is if there is a younger sibling and the older child perceives the younger one is getting more attention than they are. The older attention may become aggressive in order to grab your attention if it reaches the stage where they would rather be told off by you than ignored. This is sometimes referred to as negative attention seeking.

Children with aggressive behaviour constitute one of the most common and difficult challenges for parents, particularly for young parents. To work on this issue it is crucial that parents have developed a relationship (with the child) based on solid communication and trust.

Parents must be willing to take a step back from the situation and view their child's behaviour in context. What is unacceptable behaviour to a parent may seem logical and appropriate to a child. The key to helping a child manage their own behaviour is to teach them realistic, constructive alternatives to the behaviour habits they have already developed.

A child with consistently aggressive behaviour may be taught how to identify when they are feeling angry and then learn strategies to apply in such situations. Children, for example, may be taught to count-to-ten, take deep breaths, run around the oval or visualise a peaceful scene. Children should not be discouraged from feeling angry but rather taught how to deal appropriately with anger when it arises.



Many acts of aggression are simply acts to get attention. It is best to ignore most misbehavior; however, this is not wise with aggression.

Children are often simply exploring cause and effect- particularly their own power to cause reactions in the world around them. This is a wonderful path of exploration, but needs to be simply redirected down the proper path, not discouraged. Encourage them to hit a play nail with a play hammer, instead of hitting their sister. Encourage them to give a kiss instead of a bite. Show them that they do have the power to get your attention, but by doing good things, not by misbehaving.

With this approach, kids will be able to resolve a lot of their problems and aggression will diminish. For very serious problems, counseling may be necessary to deal with the difficult emotions they are facing. The earlier the problems are identified and handled, the sooner they will be resolved.



To help you overcome the problems of aggression in a child here are some top tips:

1. Watch for triggers

Try and work out if there are triggers that regularly cause aggressive behaviour. It can be as simple as children regularly arguing and becoming aggressive over what television program to watch.

2. Be careful how you react

If you react to any problems in the home by shouting or hitting out, your children will learn from you that this is acceptable behaviour at stressful times. Therefore if they are in a situation that they find frustrating they are likely to react in a similar, aggressive manner. Set an example for them. Acknowledge his anger, as it is often attention seeking behaviour.

3. Discuss appropriate and in appropriate behaviour

If you have had a hard day, wait until there is a period of calm and discuss your child's actions with them in a peaceful way. Explain to them the likely results of their actions.

4. Give attention and show affection

All children need attention and affection. This is especially true for older children with younger siblings.

5. Monitor TV programs and play

Although the effect of television on children can be overstated there could be a link between your child's aggression and what they watch on television. In a similar way take note of the type of games your child tends to play. If they play lots of games with toy guns and swords it may be a good idea to try to change the balance of their play and introduce a number of calmer pursuits as well.

6. Give warning time

Most children get frustrated and can show aggression if they are busy playing and you suddenly tell them it is time to go. Although it is not always possible try to give them warning that it is nearly time to stop playing.

7. Provide alternative toys and stimulus

If you sense a child is getting board or frustrated with what they are doing be ready to suggest trying something different.

8. Encourage a child to discuss problems

The more you talk to a child the easier they will find it to establish their own vocabulary and be able to express their frustrations verbally. In quiet periods explain to your child how they can resolve their differences through discussion and negotiation rather than through hitting out.

9. Praise good behaviour

If you have taken your child somewhere and they have behaved well or if they have had a good day at home then praise them. This will make your child feel good and want to behave in a positive manner more often.

Discipline without damage

Here are some ideas about how to vary your approach to discipline to best fit your family.

It's important to not spank, hit, or slap a child of any age. Babies and toddlers are especially unlikely to be able to make any connection between their behavior and physical punishment. They will only feel the pain of the hit.

Ages 0 to 2

Babies and toddlers are naturally curious. So it's wise to eliminate temptations and no-nos — items such as TVs and video equipment, stereos, jewelry, and especially cleaning supplies and medications should be kept well out of reach. When your crawling baby or roving toddler heads toward an unacceptable or dangerous play object, calmly say "No" and either remove your child from the area or distract him or her with an appropriate activity.

Timeouts can be effective discipline for toddlers. A child who has been hitting, biting, or throwing food, for example, should be told why the behavior is unacceptable and taken to a designated timeout area — a kitchen chair or bottom stair — for a minute or two to calm down (longer timeouts are not effective for toddlers). Remember they have no concept of time so perhaps use something visual as a sand egg timer they can see.

Don't forget that kids learn by watching adults, particularly their parents. Make sure your behavior is role-model material. You'll make a much stronger impression by putting your own belongings away rather than just issuing orders to your child to pick up toys while your stuff is left strewn around.

Ages 3 to 5

As your child grows and begins to understand the connection between actions and consequences, make sure you start communicating the rules of your family's home.

Explain to kids what you expect of them **before** you punish them for a certain behavior. For instance, the first time your 3-year-old uses crayons to decorate the living room wall, discuss why that's not allowed and what will happen if your child does it again (for instance, your child will have to help clean the wall and will not be able to use the crayons for the rest of the day).



If the wall gets decorated again a few days later, issue a reminder that crayons are for paper only and then enforce the consequences.

The earlier that parents establish this kind of "I set the rules and you're expected to listen or accept the consequences" standard, the better for everyone. Although it's sometimes easier for parents to ignore occasional bad behavior or not follow through on some threatened punishment, this sets a bad precedent. Consistency is the key to effective discipline, and it's important for parents to decide (together, if you are not a single parent) what the rules are and then uphold them.

While you become clear on what behaviors will be punished, don't forget to reward good behaviors. Don't underestimate the positive effect that your praise can have — discipline is not just about punishment but also about recognizing good behavior. For example, saying "I'm proud of you for sharing your toys at playgroup" is usually more effective than punishing a child for the opposite behavior — not sharing. And be specific when doling out praise; don't just say, "Good job!"

If your child continues an unacceptable behavior no matter what you do, try making a chart with a box for each day of the week. Decide how many times your child can misbehave before a punishment kicks in or how long the proper behavior must be displayed before it is rewarded. Post the chart on the refrigerator and then track the good and unacceptable behaviors every day. This will give your child (and you) a concrete look at how it's going. Once this begins to work, praise your child for learning to control misbehavior and, especially, for overcoming any stubborn problem. Rewards and consequences should be given on a daily basis. Long-term consequences have little effect.

Timeouts also can work well for kids at this age. Establish a suitable timeout place that's free of distractions and will force your child to think about how he or she has behaved. Remember, getting sent to your room doesn't have an impact if a computer, TV, and video games are there and remember the child's bedroom needs to be his sanctuary, not a place of discipline.

Don't forget to consider the length of time that will best suit your child. Experts say 1 minute for each year of age is a good rule of thumb; others recommend using the timeout until the child is calmed down (to teach self-regulation). Remember to use a visual timer, egg timer is good so child can see beginning and end of discipline. It's important to tell kids what the right thing to do is, not just to say what the wrong thing is. For example, instead of saying "Don't jump on the couch," try "Please sit on the furniture and put your feet on the floor."

Ages 6 to 8

Timeouts and consequences are also effective discipline strategies for this age group.

Again, consistency is crucial, as is follow-through. Make good on any promises of discipline or else you risk undermining your authority. Kids have to believe that you mean what you say. This is not to say you can't give second chances or allow a certain margin of error, but for the most part, you should act on what you say.

Be careful not to make unrealistic threats of punishment ("Slam that door and you'll never watch TV again!") in anger, since not following through could weaken **all** your threats. If you threaten to turn the car around and go home if the squabbling in the backseat doesn't stop, make sure you do exactly that. The credibility you'll gain with your kids is much more valuable than a lost beach day.

Huge punishments may take away your power as a parent. If you ground your son or daughter for a month, your child may not feel motivated to change behaviors because everything has already been taken away.

Ages 9 to 12

Kids in this age group — just as with all ages — can be disciplined with natural consequences. As they mature and request more independence and responsibility, teaching them to deal with the consequences of their behavior is an effective and appropriate method of discipline.

For example, if your fifth grader's homework isn't done before bedtime, should you make him or her stay up to do it or even lend a hand yourself? Probably not — you'll miss an opportunity to teach a key life lesson. If homework is incomplete, your child will go to school the next day without it and suffer the resulting bad grade.

It's natural for parents to want to rescue kids from mistakes, but in the long run they do kids a favor by letting them fail sometimes. Kids see what behaving improperly can mean and probably won't make those mistakes again. However, if your child does not seem to be learning from natural consequences, set up some of your own to help modify the behavior.

Ages 13 and Up

By now you've laid the groundwork. Your child knows what's expected and that you mean what you say about the penalties for bad behavior. Don't let down your guard now — discipline is just as important for teens as it is for younger kids. Just as with the 4-year-old who needs you to set a bedtime and enforce it, your teen needs boundaries, too.



Set up rules regarding homework, visits by friends, curfews, and dating and discuss them beforehand with your teenager so there will be no misunderstandings. Your teen will probably complain from time to time, but also will realize that you're in control. Believe it or not, teens still want and need you to set limits and enforce order in their lives, even as you grant them greater freedom and responsibility.

When your teen **does** break a rule, taking away privileges may seem the best plan of action. While it's fine to take away the car for a week, for example, be sure to also discuss why coming home an hour past curfew is unacceptable and worrisome.

Remember to give a teenager some control over things. Not only will this limit the number of power struggles you have, it will help your teen respect the decisions that you do need to make. You could allow a younger teen to make decisions concerning school clothes, hair styles, or even the condition of his or her room. As your teen gets older, that realm of control might be extended to include an occasional relaxed curfew.

It's also important to focus on the positives. For example, have your teen earn a later curfew by demonstrating positive behavior instead of setting an earlier curfew as punishment for irresponsible behavior.

A Word About Spanking

Perhaps no form of discipline is more controversial than spanking. Here are some reasons why experts discourage spanking:

- Spanking teaches kids that it's OK to hit when they're angry.
- Spanking can physically harm children.
- Rather than teaching kids how to change their behavior, spanking makes them fearful of their parents and merely teaches them to avoid getting caught.
- For kids seeking attention by acting out, spanking may inadvertently "reward" them — negative attention is better than no attention at all.



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