



Trauma
Care



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Information

Children that lash out

**Biting! Hitting! Pulling hair! Has your child ever lashed out and hurt someone?
Has another aggressive child ever bothered him?
If your answer is yes, join the crowd!**



Almost all of us struggle with understanding and helping our children when they hurt others, and when they are hurt by other children.

It's a shock to us the first time our sweet sons and daughters suddenly bite someone, or throw something at the new baby in the family. Here are some guiding principles for understanding and relieving children's aggression, so they can relax and enjoy their friends and siblings.

First, it's important to understand that **children don't want to attack others**. They'd much rather have fun and feel safe and loved. They play well when they feel connected.

But when children lose their sense of connection, they feel tense, frightened, or isolated. In this "emotional emergency," they may lash out at other children. **Children don't intend to be mean**. In fact, acts of aggression aren't under the child's control.

Developing impulse control and emotional self-regulation skills is big work for children and takes a few years. It's normal for young children to be anti-social, rebellious, defiant and even verbally aggressive at times and for children up to the age of about six to also be physically aggressive at times. You can particularly expect an increase in defiance or aggression at times of extra stress relating to changes like a new sibling, moving house, change of caregiver, increased conflict amongst parents or starting school. But when a child's defiant, destructive or aggressive behaviour becomes an ongoing issue, it's important to look deeper into the difficult feelings and unmet needs that are likely driving their behaviour.

When a child carries a backlog of unresolved emotions, they tend to have a low tolerance to stress and even small requests, challenges or obstacles can feel overwhelming to them. They may be happily playing one minute and suddenly a small disappointment sparks a strong reaction. The feelings beneath a particular act of aggression may stem from past experiences and may be completely unrelated to the current situation that triggered the reaction. As difficult as it is for parents, it's exactly this tendency to over-react that is the external indicator of a child's internal conflict that needs to be addressed. Ultimately, they need to see that we're genuinely willing to remain patient as they work to offload all the big feelings that have previously built up.

if a child feels safe, she will show how she feels

When it feels safe enough to show their feelings, children who feel upset don't hurt anyone. They feel a bond with their parent or caregiver, and run to the nearest loved one for help. They cry, and release the knot of fear and grief they feel. The adult who listens and allows the child to "fall apart" gives the child a huge gift—enough caring and love to allow her to heal from the feelings that make life hard for her.



if a child doesn't feel safe, she may signal for help by becoming aggressive

The child who lashes out feels sad, frightened, or alone. She doesn't look frightened when she is about to bite, push, or hit. But her fears are at the heart of the problem. Fear robs a child of her ability to feel that she cares about others. Her trusting nature is crusted with feelings: "No one understands me; no one cares about me." If you watch carefully, you will see that this kind of feeling drains a child's face of flexibility and sparkle in the seconds before she lashes out.

Children get these feelings of isolation, no matter how loving and close we parents or teachers are. Some children are only occasionally frightened and aggressive. Other children have an abiding sense of fear and desperation that comes from circumstances beyond anyone's control. Children acquire fears from a difficult birth, medical treatments, family tensions, the unhappiness of others around them, and from the absence of loved ones. Any frightening time in a child's past can create a tendency toward aggression.

Parents and caregivers have the power to help an aggressive child. A child's aggression can't be erased by reasoning, Time Out, or enforcing "logical consequences." The knot of intense feelings inside the child isn't touched by rewards or punishment. A child's behavior out of her control, once she begins to feel disconnected.

Helping children with aggression

Step one in helping a child is to stop the aggressive behavior by moving close and offering a warm connection.

Then, listening helps heal the hurt. The child will either laugh or cry, and might tremble, perspire, or struggle mightily. The adult provides a safe connection and the time the child needs to release the fear she feels. The crying and physical struggling and perspiring she does get her limbic system—the part of her brain that sounds emotional alarms when she feels frightened—back in working order by providing an outlet for those unmanageable feelings.

Here are some simple steps you can follow to help a child who becomes aggressive.

These measures will, over time, drain the feelings that cause the aggression, and will help the child feel closer to you and much more flexible in her play with other children.

Observe. Under what conditions do the child's fears overtake her? Is it when Mommy has been at a meeting the night before? When there have been arguments at home? When other children crowd close? When left to play with a sibling in a separate room? Generally, you can come up with a good guess as to when the child might lose her sense of connection and become aggressive.

Don't fool yourself. Give up the hope that "this time it might not happen." Mental preparation is important. If your child bites you suddenly when you're doing rough and tumble play, then every time you play this way, be mentally prepared for biting to occur.

do a friendly but attentive "patrol" to catch the behavior as it rises

Prepare for aggression by staying close by. Move close enough to be able to reach the child quickly, should aggression begin.

When the expected behavior begins, you need to be close enough to intervene quickly and calmly to prevent a child's hand from landing in someone's hair, or her teeth from fastening onto you, or her fist from landing on her friend. Because she's not in control of her behavior, she needs you to keep her from hurting someone. You can say something like, "I can't let you hurt John," or "Oh, no, I don't think I want those teeth any closer." while holding her forehead a few inches above your shoulder.



stop the behavior, then stay listen

When you have stopped the aggression, connect. Give the upset child eye contact, a warm voice, and kind physical contact. She needs some sign that it's safe to show you her feelings. You can say things like: "I know you don't feel good," "I'm right here and I'll keep things safe for you," "It looks like things are hard right now," "Please tell me about it," "No one's mad at you," or, "I want to stay with you right now."

The feelings causing the aggression will surface. The crying and fighting a child does will release the hurt that drives her off track. Don't expect your child to be reasonable. She probably won't use words to tell you how she feels. Her body language and tone while crying or screaming will speak to you. Show your caring as you let

her writhe with upset. Keep both of you safe by managing her movements when you need to—a hand on her wrist so she can't grab your glasses, or an arm around her waist so she can't kick your legs.

While she is offloading feelings, she can't reason. Don't lecture or explain. Even very young children know right from wrong. But when they are wild with feelings, they can't listen to their own best thinking, or yours. After the unhappy feelings are gone, children remember, on their own, the important principles you have taught them.

if you arrive too late when children are hitting, decide who to listen to first

If you arrive on the scene too late, more than one child needs your help. Make things safe immediately. Put your hand on the toy soon to be thrown, or open the aggressive child's fingers to release her sister's hair.

Don't blame, shame, or punish. These actions further frighten children, and further isolate them. They add to the load of hurt that makes children aggressive.

Decide who you are going to listen to first. Both the aggressor and the victim need your help. You will be more effective if you concentrate on one child at a time, giving just a moment to the other child. Try to go to the aggressor as often as you go to the victim. Of course, the victim needs someone to check the damage done, and to care. If it's the aggressor you decide to focus on, you can tell the child who was hurt, "I'm sorry. I know that hurt. I'm going to spend a minute here with you. Then I need to see Marla and help her—she must be pretty upset to do this to you." You might want to try keeping the crying child close to you while you attend to the aggressor child.

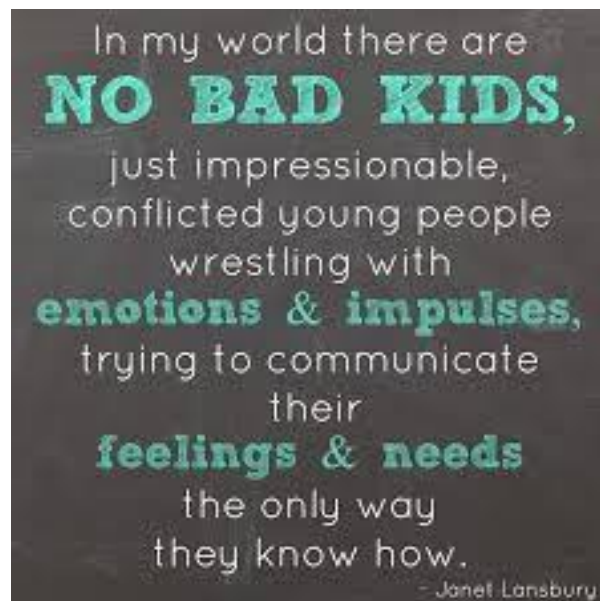
Rather than calling out verbal instructions from across the room, swoop in as fast as you can with the awareness and acceptance that he's unable to stop when you ask him to stop. A child lashing out is caught in the grip of a rising tide of intense feelings that they simply can't contain or control. Come down to his level, help him to stop lashing out verbally or physically by expressing your limit as gently as you can, while placing your hands on his body in a warm and affectionate way and truly connect, aiming to diffuse his anger and fear. You might need to take his hands, restraining him as gently as possible and say "I'm not going to let you break anything", or "I can't let you hurt your little brother." This kind of expression is much less threatening than words like "don't you dare", "stop doing that right now."



There's much that you can do to diminish the pressure on an already stressed child

- Develop self-regulation, mindfulness and self-care skills that enable you to hold strong and steady during emotional storms, hence modelling the same.
- Increase moments of connection, warmth and humour to deepen their sense of safety and security and alleviate fears of disconnection.

- Give reassurances, choices, advance warnings and explanations to help them deal with the stress that limits bring.
- Listen in a way that invites them to talk, share, vent and cry; showing that you value them pouring out the upsets that otherwise weigh them down. Aggression is a cry out to offload tensions and feel heard.
- Commit to not lose your cool when your child loses theirs. Expecting a child to calm down while we criticism them is like sending them outside to play while restraining them.



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 medical professional for a correct diagnosis.