

Managing Aggressive Behaviour in Children

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 (usually biting, scratching and hitting) another child or adult.

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

Frustration can have a number of triggers - 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. For example, if there is a younger sibling and the older child thinks the younger one is getting more attention than they are the older child may become aggressive in order to grab your attention - it has reached the stage where they would rather be told off by you than ignored. This is sometimes referred to as negative attention seeking.

Being territorial can occur if a child is playing happily by themselves. Another child may appear and wish to join in. If the first child does not want the second child to play as well he or she may show aggression towards the other child to try and drive them away.

These aggressive behaviours are most likely to be found in younger children. As their vocabulary evolves and grows they are more likely to be able to demonstrate their dissatisfaction through words rather than hitting and biting. Even then you may have a child who is inclined to shout and scream.

What can I do??

To help you overcome the problems of aggression in a child here are our top 10 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. Also check whether your child is hungry, thirsty or tired as these factors influence how your child is feeling.

It may be easier to check for any patterns of triggers if you keep a record of time of day it happens, what they had been doing prior to outburst, what they are due to be doing next, when they had last eaten/drank. This will give you a better idea of what is affecting your child without having to try to remember everything from one outburst to the next.

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. If this means that you need to leave the children safely in one room whilst you go and calm down in another room then do so – it is better to leave them than lose your temper in their presence.

3. Discuss appropriate and inappropriate 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. For example explain that when they hit or bite it hurts and that other children are unlikely to want to play with them in the future.

You can also try to tackle issues before they arise by discussing behaviours prior to certain activities. For example state that if your child helps whilst out shopping, does not run off and does not ask for gifts that they will receive a reward – this does not have to cost money; you could offer extra IT time, set up a movie night with popcorn or have an extra trip to feed the ducks.

4. Give attention and show affection

All children need attention and affection. This is especially true for older children with younger siblings. A first born child gets used to a certain amount of attention and affection. They can then find it very difficult to understand why they have to share the limelight with a younger child. This can lead to them feeling rejected and isolated. Make time to pay them special attention.

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. If they like to watch programs that include a level of violence then this can have a negative effect on their behaviour. Be aware that this can also include cartoons – some cartoons have a high level of aggressive behaviour. This includes some apps which initially appear that they are suitable for children however can contain violent, slapstick actions.

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.

When you are playing rough and tumble games with your child ensure these do not go beyond acceptable limits. If they do then your child could be getting the message that this level of aggression is acceptable in other situations.

6. Monitor the influence of friends

If you have always lived in a quiet, peaceful environment then the introduction of a new friend can have an impact on the way your child behaves. If you example your child sees their friends answering back to their parents or hitting a sibling or other children, they may start to consider this as acceptable behaviour. It may prove necessary to try to end the friendship.

7. 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. This gives them the chance to get used to the idea and you are likely to get a more positive response. At the nursery we tend to use egg timer as a visual aid for the children eg we will state that when the sand runs through it will be time to tidy up.

8. Provide alternative toys and stimulus

If you sense a child is getting bored or frustrated with what they are doing be ready to suggest trying something different. A child who is trying to do something they find very difficult may run out of patience and lose their temper. Watch out for these signs happening and whenever possible have some diverting alternatives ready.

9. 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.

10. 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.

There will be times when no matter what you do your child still shows aggression. If this happens make sure you keep a close eye on your child when you think a flashpoint may arise. Be prepared to step in quickly and guide your child away from the situation as calmly as you can.

If after trying these tips your child shows no sign of tempering their aggression then it is time to seek further help. Try talking to health visitors or teachers as a first step.