

Aggressive Behavior

What Is Considered Typical?

When children are learning how to express their emotions, they are often in the company of other children who are learning the same thing. When several very young children are all learning group interaction and social skills, it's likely there will be hitting, pushing, shoving, and sometimes even some biting. Although aggressive behaviors are not unexpected, they must be addressed. Such behavior is usually just a sign that your child hasn't learned better ways to express their very strongly felt emotions.

How Can a Child Moderate Aggressive Behavior?

Just as most children learn how to do some things with little or no help—like climbing up stairs—other things must be taught—like going down the stairs. The same is true for emotions. Some emotions take almost no effort to understand—like joy and sadness. The meanings and expressions of other emotions, however, must be taught. For example, many people confuse anger with frustration. And some mistakenly think that anger is bad. But they are confusing the feeling with how it is expressed. Anger is a normal part of life, but hitting, biting, or saying mean things doesn't have to be.

Actively teach your child how to express their emotions. This is best done when you or your child is experiencing an emotion. The next time you are feeling anger or frustration, talk it through. It may sound like this: "I am so frustrated that the store is closed—I really wanted to get this errand done today. Next time I'll call first to make sure they are open."

What about Physical Energy?

Not all aggressive behavior, though, is based on emotions. Some children just have lots of physical energy—they enjoy roughhousing. Even though these children mean no harm, this kind of play should be closely watched. Children usually don't realize when their physical play is disruptive to others, or they may not realize that they are strong enough to hurt someone.

If your child seems restless, try saying something like, "Mikey, you look like you feel restless, and Katie doesn't look like she is enjoying wrestling with you. Why don't you pretend to be an astronaut and fly around the room." There are times when flying around the room isn't practical. When this happens, let your child know when and how they can get their energy out.

For children who are very physical and have lots of energy, a preschool class in creative movement, dance, karate, or tumbling may be a good way for them to use their energy and build self-esteem. When choosing a class, try to find a teacher who works well with energetic children.

Are There Times to Be Concerned?

If a child is guided to develop appropriate ways to express anger and frustration, but is not able to change their behavior, there may be a problem. If you have a concern, talk with your child's doctor.

Modeling Emotions

If you see your child trying to get something from another child, intervene by saying something like "Sophie, you look frustrated, and it looks like Kyle doesn't want to give up that book yet. What can you do?"

Then help Sophie figure out a solution. If her ideas include just taking the book or hitting Kyle, explain that both those options might work, but they are not respectful of Kyle. Eventually Sophie will think of something.

Then watch as Sophie puts her solution to work. It may not work perfectly the first time, and she may need support as she talks to Kyle. She may even go back to her old ways. But with repetition and success, Sophie will develop new patterns.

Exposure to Aggressive Behavior

Children who witness aggression—whether it's on TV, in a video game, at school, or among family members—are at risk of displaying overly aggressive behaviors.

