



Aggressive Behavior in Young Children



When a child physically hurts another child it can be upsetting to the teachers, parents and children who are involved in the incident. Knowing how to respond to these situations will help caregivers provide a safe environment. Children who are aggressive are more likely to be rejected as playmates and often continue to have problems getting along as they get older. Therefore, it is important for Early Care and Education (ECE) professionals to work with the child and family and teach more acceptable behavior as early as possible.

Behaviors that are physically hurtful

Physically harming behaviors include biting, hitting, kicking, pushing, pinching, scratching and pulling hair. Although these behaviors are often seen in young children, they need to be replaced with other behaviors that are not hurtful.

Why do young children hurt?

It is not unusual for young children to push, hit or grab to get attention or get their way. They have not yet developed the skills to make their wishes and needs known. Children who are in group care are even more likely to experience frustration and conflict. A child who has limited motor control, verbal and social skills may resort to physical means.

Other stressors that may cause a child to act out are boredom, hunger, transitions, toilet learning, tiredness and illness. Sometimes an ECE environment that is over-stimulating or overcrowded may cause the child to feel the need to defend his space and favorite toys.

A child may also be acting out because of the home environment. Is there something going on at home that is stressing the child, for example a new sibling or a divorce? Is the child exposed to domestic violence or TV with violent themes and images?

How to respond to hurtful behavior

Help children build skills for dealing with stressful situations, conflict and negative emotions. With consistent messages from adults at home and school, young children will learn the skills they need to solve problems without hurting other children.

- Recognize the feeling the child is having, teach the child to use the words to express his feelings. Say, "I know you really wanted that doll" or "It's hard to wait for your turn."
- Set clear limits. Tell the child, "You are not allowed to hurt another child here, this is a safe place and I can't let you hurt others."
- Problem solve with the child. Say, "The next time you want someone's toy ask first or offer to trade another toy." Have more than one of a popular toy or use a timer to help children take turns.
- Help the child understand how the hurt child feels. Say, "That hurts!" Discuss how nobody likes to be hurt.
- Redirect. Take the child away from the situation. Say, "I see you are not following the rules, let's do something else for now and try again later."
- Help children learn to join a game or get the attention of another child in a friendly way.
- Demonstrate kindness and be a role model.
- Teach children the words to describe their feelings and wishes. Keep it simple for children who have limited vocabulary; "Can I have a turn?", "Stop", "That's mine!" As the child develops, the statements can become more complex like "Can I use that toy after you?" Offer lots of praise for using words.
- Read books, role-play and use puppets to teach about solving problems in ways that are not hurtful.

Create an environment where it is less likely for physical aggression to occur. Look at your space, materials, policy and practice to see if you can make changes.

- React to hurtful behavior in a consistent way. Do not respond with anger or ignore the behavior. Be consistent so that children feel safe and learn to predict the consequences of their actions. Communicate with other teachers to make sure you are all responding in the same way.
- Make sure you have enough toys, space and stimulating activities. Use outside space for children to be physically active. Provide a quiet space for children to practice self-calming behaviors.
- Keep a log of the child's behavior. Observe the child and note conditions that prompt hurtful behavior. This may help to understand what is triggering the aggression for example, hunger, transition, or toileting needs.
- Never spank a child. Not only does corporal punishment send the wrong message to children, according to Community Care Licensing regulations, corporal punishment is not allowed in Child Care and Infant Centers. See Personal Rights form LIC 613A.
- Respond in a calm manner.
- Should a child with aggressive behavior be suspended? Removing a child from the program or temporary suspension should be a last resort. Consider that a child who is suspended may go home to an angry parent and that a parent who misses work might face financial hardship. It is better to create a plan of action and deal with the problems directly. However, there are times when a particular program is not a good fit for a child. Teachers and parents may agree that a child might do better in a different environment. Some children thrive in an environment that is small and quiet with fewer children, while others need lots of outdoor space and physical activity.

Communicate with parents/guardians. Involve the parents in creating a behavior plan. This will provide consistency between the home and the child care environment. Share what you observe in your program and ask parents to describe the child's behavior at home.

When to get professional help:

Although a toddler may react by hitting and grabbing, by the time a child is three or four, he should be gaining the verbal and social skills to manage stressful situations. While an occasional aggressive act does not signal a problem, hurtful actions should not be the child's typical response to conflict or negative emotions. For a preschooler who loses control quickly, frequently and does not use other ways to solve problems over a period of weeks or months seek help from a primary care provider or a mental health professional.

Resources and References:

Rady Children's Hospital, San Diego, Aggressive Behavior, www.chsd.org/1420.cfm.

Hewitt, Deborah, *So This is Normal Too?* Redleaf Press 1995.

Steffan Saifer, *Practical Solutions to Practically Every Problem*, Redleaf Press 2003.