

Managing Aggression in Young Children

Decrease the Number of Meltdowns

Become a good observer. Notice when your child's body movements, facial expression, or language are starting to show his frustration. At this point it may help to change things in the environment.

Manage the Meltdowns

Aggressive children almost always have times when they are overwhelmed and can't think clearly ("meltdown"). At those times, they need your help.

- When your child is no longer able to control his anger, he needs you to stay calm, speak quietly, and move back to give him space.
- A few calming words and just being there reassures children as they try to regain control.
- You can sympathize with his feelings and still not approve of his behaviour.
- This is not the time to reason or problem-solve with your child.
- Move other children away.
- Some children like to be held, some don't. You know your child best. If you decide that your child would be helped by moving him to his safe place, tell him calmly that you will help him go there.
- Encourage every effort your child makes to get control of his temper and behaviour.

- When recovering from a meltdown, your child can easily become aggressive again. Don't increase demands on him too soon.
- Support his efforts to get control over his emotions.
- Give him hope by letting him know you will help him solve the problem and feel calmer.

Build a Positive Relationship with Your Child

Your child needs to know that he can count on you to help him feel safe and loved. Set aside a few minutes every day for special playtime with him. See the pamphlet on "Child-Led Play".

Books for children about anger:

- By Elizabeth Crary:
 - "I'm Mad"
 - "I'm Furious"
 - "I'm Frustrated"
- "I was so mad" by Norma Simon
- "Franklin's Bad Day" by Paulette Bourgeois and Brenda Clark

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.

Is aggressive behaviour normal?

Anger is a normal human emotion. We all show anger, even as babies. Often young children can't tell us what frustrates them. They are not able to problem-solve. This is why anger may be shown through aggressive behaviour. Sometimes young children hit, kick, and bite. In fact, people are most aggressive at age two. Usually aggressive behaviour slowly decreases after 30 months of age.

Parents have the important job to help their young children learn how to handle frustration.

- Experts recommend that parents use consistent routines. A few simple rules are important.
- Parents also set the example for children through their own behaviour.
- Distraction helps some children calm down.
- Help children learn words to tell us about their feelings.

Some children will need more help.

Who is at risk for more serious behaviour problems?

Some preschool children have concerns that increase the risk for more serious trouble later on. Parents need to know when aggressive behaviour is an early warning sign of possible problems later on.

Children need special attention if:

- they had a complicated birth or have a condition such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) that may have damaged the brain
- they have a fussy or difficult temperament
- they are very sensitive to noise, lights, touch or other sensations
- they are delayed in development, especially their communication skills
- they have had many changes in their lives, such as where they live, who they live with
- a parent has an untreated mental illness, such as depression
- there is violence, conflict, or stress in the home
- their parents use harsh discipline

What can I do to help my aggressive child?

The important thing to remember is that *children behave well when they can*. Young children do not choose to act aggressively. When young children are unusually stubborn or short-tempered, it is often because of one or more of the risk factors mentioned above. The more risks factors, the more likely the child will have behaviour problems later on.

Have Your Child's Strengths and Needs Assessed.

- Speak with your family doctor.
- Ask to see a pediatrician if you are still concerned.

Create a Helpful Environment

- Your tone of voice and body language affect your child. It is not only what you say but the way you say it that is important.
- Understand your child—let him know you are on his side.
- Change your expectations—lower demands for perfect behaviour.
- Know what situations are going to cause problems (e.g., some children can't handle noisy or busy settings).
- Watch for the warning signs and support your child, instead of getting angry and increasing the tension.
- Help your child label his feelings by speaking for him (“You must be feeling angry because...”).
- Describe the behaviour without criticizing your child.
- Don't take your child's behaviour or language as a personal insult.
- At a calm time, you and your child should plan a safe place. This is a place where your child can go if he is starting to feel upset. One idea is a corner where a bean bag chair and a squishy toy are always kept.