

GROWING IDEAS

WHACK! SLAM! BANG!

Why do young children behave aggressively?

Aggressive behavior—hitting, pinching, biting, and other acts through which children may hurt themselves or others—is a way children communicate by using their bodies. Children behave aggressively for a variety of reasons. Children may hit because they feel angry and frustrated. They may kick because they are still learning how to cooperate, share, and understand another person's viewpoint. Children may throw toys when the environment is too noisy, chaotic, and busy.



Children may act aggressively when they feel scared, frustrated, or upset and don't know what to do about it.

For example:

- When children are unable to meet expectations, they may feel rejected or misunderstood.
- When children become involved in conflict, it can create anger they may not know how to channel.
- Children with low self-esteem or difficulties with sensory processing may misunderstand social cues and react aggressively.

Children may act aggressively when the environment is not a good match for their needs.

- When children feel stressed, crowded, tired, thirsty, hungry, or experience high noise levels, they may feel anxious or overwhelmed.
- Environments that are disorganized or chaotic, with too few or too many play choices, may cause stress in children.
- Schedules and routines that require children to sit or wait for long periods of time or involve frequent transitions, may lead children to lose control.
- If young children are not closely supervised, conflicts may escalate to the point of aggression.

Learning to recognize and manage aggressive feelings and urges is a part of all children's development.

- Aggressive feelings and impulses exist and develop at the same time children are learning pro-social behaviors, such as sharing, turn taking, and cooperation.
- Young children may not be able to understand another's point of view. This can lead to misunderstandings and conflict.

Help children learn how to recognize aggressive feelings and to behave in socially acceptable ways.

- Teach children the difference between feelings, actions, and self. Young children often exhibit an “I feel, I do, I am” way of thinking. Tell young children, “It is okay to feel angry but it is not okay to hurt people.”
- Teach and model social and play skills such as how to greet another playmate, join a small group of children in play, or share a toy.
- Limit children’s exposure to aggressive acts on television news, in movies, and other media. Young children mix up reality and fantasy. They may imitate what they have seen, not understanding that the aggressive behavior shown on TV, in movies, or other media, causes pain and suffering in real life.

Viewing media violence can make children more aggressive, fearful, disrespectful, and insensitive to the effects of violence.

Lovell, M. (2000). “Tuned into Violence: Children and the Media.” Unpublished paper, Wheelock College, Boston, MA.

Help children learn how to manage their feelings.

- Provide concrete, consistent, age-appropriate expectations that match children’s abilities.
- Demonstrate and model specific behaviors and words children can use in conflict situations, such as “no,” “mine,” and “I don’t like that.”
- Offer alternative methods for expressing upset feelings such as puppetry, painting, using play dough, or making an emotion collage.
- Learn how differences in children’s individual rhythms, communication styles, and sensory needs can impact their understanding of social cues and reactions.
- Notice social relationships. Plan daily activities that include individual adult-child time and paired, peer group activities.

Does the environment support children’s success?

- Observe children’s use and reaction to the environment carefully. Can children rest in a quiet place as the need arises? Are the lighting, noise level, and furniture arrangement comfortable for all? Are there enough toys and variety of materials?
- Prepare activities in advance.
- Plan for transitions and provide cues prior to the end of activities.
- Arrange the space and materials to promote cooperative play (i.e. block, house-keeping, easel painting areas).
- Incorporate community building and friendship into the curriculum through books, songs, and discussions.



Where to learn more:

Hewitt, D. (1995). *So this is normal too?* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

DeBord, K. (October 2000). *Childhood Aggression: Where Does it Come From? How Can it be Managed?* Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/aggression.html>

“Helping the Often-Angry Child.” (June 2004). Resources on Early Learning: Tip Sheets. Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://www.illinoisearlylearning.org/tipsheets/angry.htm>

See also: *Growing Ideas Toolkit* tip sheets: “Behavior Communicates;” “Friends and Feelings;” and “Building Belonging.”



Maine’s Network of Child Care Resource Development Centers

C E N T E R F O R

COMMUNITY INCLUSION & DISABILITY STUDIES

Maine’s University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service

<http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/>



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