

Aggressive Behavior



My child is sometimes very aggressive. What is the best way to prevent this type of behavior?

The best way to prevent aggressive behavior is to give your child a stable, secure home life with firm, loving discipline and full-time supervision during the toddler and preschool years. Everyone who cares for your child should be a good role model and agree on the rules he's expected to observe as well as the response to use if he disobeys. Whenever he breaks an important rule, he should be reprimanded *immediately* so that he understands exactly what he's done wrong.

Children don't know the rules of the house until they're taught them, so that is one of your important parenting responsibilities. Toddlers are normally interested in touching and exploring, so if there are valuables you don't want them to handle, hide or remove them. Consider setting up a separate portion of your home where he can play with books and toys.

For discipline to be most effective, it should take place on an ongoing basis, not just when your child misbehaves. In fact, it begins with parents smiling at their smiling baby, and it continues with praise and genuine affection for all positive and appropriate behaviors. Over time, if your child feels encouraged and respected, rather than demeaned and embarrassed, he is more likely to listen, learn, and change when necessary. It is always more effective to positively reinforce desired behaviors and to teach children alternative behaviors rather than just say, "Stop it or else."

While teaching him other ways to respond, there's also nothing wrong with distracting him at times, or trying another approach. As long as you're not "bribing" him to behave differently by offering him sweet snacks, for example, there's nothing wrong with intentionally changing his focus.

Remember, your child has little natural self-control. He needs you to teach him not to kick, hit, or bite when he is angry, but instead to express his feelings through words. It's important for him to learn the difference between real and imagined insults and between appropriately standing up for his rights and attacking out of anger. The best way to teach these lessons is to supervise your child carefully when he's involved in disputes with his playmates. As long as a disagreement is minor, you can keep your distance and let the children solve it on their own. However, you must intervene when children get into a physical fight that continues even after they're told to stop, or when one child seems to be in an uncontrollable rage and is assaulting or biting the other. Pull the children apart and keep them separate until they have calmed down. If the fight is extremely violent, you may have to end the play session. Make it clear that it doesn't matter who "started it." There is no excuse for trying to hurt each other.

To avoid or minimize "high-risk" situations, teach your child ways to deal with his anger without resorting to aggressive behavior. Teach him to say "no" in a firm tone of voice, to turn his back, or to find compromises instead of fighting with his body. Through example, teach him that settling differences with words is more

effective—and more civilized—than with physical violence. Praise him on his appropriate behavior and help explain to him how “grown-up” he is acting whenever he uses these tactics instead of hitting, kicking, or biting. And always reinforce and praise his behavior when he is demonstrating kindness and gentleness.

There’s also nothing wrong with using a time-out when his behavior is inappropriate, and it can be used in children as young as one year old. These time-outs should be a last resort, however. Have him sit in a chair or go to a “boring” place where there are no distractions; in essence, you’re separating him from his misbehavior, and giving him time to cool off. Briefly explain to your child what you’re doing and why—but no long lectures. Initially, when children are young, time-out is over as soon as they have calmed down and are “quiet and still.” Ending time-out once they are quiet and still reinforces this behavior, so your child learns that time out means “quiet and still.” Once they have learned to calm themselves (to be quiet and still), a good rule of thumb is one minute of a timeout for each year in your child’s age—thus, a three-year-old should have a three-minute time-out. When the time-out is over, there needs to be a time-in, while giving him plenty of positive attention when doing the right thing.

Always watch your own behavior around your child. One of the best ways to teach him appropriate behavior is to control your own temper. If you express your anger in quiet, peaceful ways, he probably will follow your example. If you must discipline him, do not feel guilty about it and certainly don’t apologize. If he senses your mixed feelings, he may convince himself that he was in the right all along and you are the “bad” one. Although disciplining your child is never pleasant, it is a necessary part of parenthood, and there is no reason to feel guilty about it. Your child needs to understand when he is in the wrong so that he will take responsibility for his actions and be willing to accept the consequences.

When to Call the Pediatrician

If your child seems to be unusually aggressive for longer than a few weeks, and you cannot cope with his behavior on your own, consult your pediatrician. Other warning signs include:

- Physical injury to himself or others (teeth marks, bruises, head injuries)
- Attacks on you or other adults
- Being sent home or barred from play by neighbors or school
- Your own fear for the safety of those around him

The most important warning sign is the frequency of outbursts. Sometimes children with conduct disorders will go for several days or a week or two without incident, and may even act quite charming during this time, but few can go an entire month without getting into trouble at least once.

Your pediatrician can suggest ways to discipline your child and will help you determine if he has a true conduct disorder. If this is the problem, you probably will not be able to resolve it on your own, and your pediatrician will advise appropriate mental health intervention.

The pediatrician or other mental health specialist will interview both you and your child and may observe your child in different situations (home, preschool, with adults and other children). A behavior-management program will be outlined. Not all methods work on all children, so there will be a certain amount of trial and reassessment.

Once several effective ways are found to reward good behavior and discourage bad, they can be used in establishing an approach that works both at home and away. The progress may be slow, but such programs usually are successful if started when the disorder is just beginning to develop.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Aggressive-Behavior.aspx>

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