

Helping Children Resolve Conflict: *Aggressive Behavior of Children*

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Kids Fighting

If you are a parent, guardian or child-care provider, witnessing children fighting is a common occurrence. Fighting or aggressive behavior can occur in various forms, whether it is slapping, grabbing, screaming, pinching, kicking, spitting, biting, threatening, teasing or a variety of other actions.

Aggression is any behavior that results in physical or emotional injury to a person or animal, or one that leads to property damage or destruction. Aggression can be verbal or physical.

There are four different types of aggressive behavior: accidental, expressive, instrumental and hostile. It is important to understand the different types of aggressive behavior that children may display so your responses are effective.

Accidental Aggression

Accidental aggression is just that, an accident. Without trying, a child hurts another child. Stepping on someone's foot while playing tag, hitting another child while putting an arm through a coat sleeve or knocking over someone's blocks while walking through a tight space are all examples of accidental aggression. Accidental aggression is not done purposely.

Expressive Aggression

Expressive aggression is committing an aggressive act because the act feels good. The child, however, does not aim to hurt someone. For example, a toddler may be so involved in play he or she doesn't notice the other child isn't happy when the blocks are knocked down.

When carried out safely with supervision, kicking, pounding, throwing and knocking down are appropriate physical activities for children. Children often enjoy these physical activities. However, problems occur when children go beyond these safe situations to gain pleasure from ones that can cause damage to people or property.

Hostile Aggression

Hostile aggression is aggression done on purpose to hurt someone physically or psychologically. The children who use hostile aggression experience satisfaction from seeing others hurt. Children use hostile aggression to make themselves feel more powerful or when they think someone is purposely trying to sabotage what they are doing. This is also known as bullying.

Instrumental Aggression

Instrumental aggression occurs when children fight over objects, territory or rights, and in the process someone gets hurt. When both children think they are the first to the paint brush or sand pile, or are the line leader, their goal is to gain control over the brush, sand pile or line. In the process of struggling to gain control, someone gets hurt.

Most aggression exhibited by children ages 2 through 6 is instrumental, with the majority of outbursts happening in fights over materials and toys. Toddlers and preschoolers are impulsive, have limited language skills and are egocentric. As a result, they may hit, grab, kick or bite to get what they need.

Children change their aggressive behavior when they mature cognitively, with experience and guidance from adults.

General Skills for Handling Children's Aggressive Behavior

1. *Model nonaggressive behavior.* Be calm when dealing with children who are upset. Keep your voice level and firm, your movements controlled, and look at the children.
2. *Eliminate aggressive materials.* Do not purchase toy weapons for your setting or allow children to bring them from home.
3. *Manage materials to minimize potential frustration among children.*

4. *Praise children when their behavior is appropriate.*
5. *Make it clear that aggression is unacceptable.*

Specific Skills for Handling Specific Aggression

1. *Accidental Aggression Management* —When accidental aggression occurs, defuse the situation by identifying the wronged child’s feelings and explaining that this was an accident. It is also good to point out to the aggressor the impact the action had on the other child and to ask the aggressor to help repair the damage.
2. *Expressive Aggression Management* — In this situation, redirect the actions of the aggressor. Focus on allowing the aggressor to continue the pleasurable physical movement while changing the situation so it becomes harmless. For example, the child who is knocking down other children’s blocks needs to be redirected to knock down their own blocks.
3. *Hostile Aggression Management* — Children must be told that hostile behavior will not be tolerated. Your actions need to support that statement. Clear boundaries and consistent expectations must be given to children who use hostile aggression. Hostile behavior cannot be allowed.
4. *Instrumental Aggression Management*— Learn, practice and use conflict mediation skills:
 - Step 1:** Initiate the mediation process.
 - Step 2:** Clarify each child’s perspective.
 - Step 3:** Sum up.
 - Step 4:** Help children generate alternatives.
 - Step 5:** Help children agree on a solution.
 - Step 6:** Reinforce the problem solving process.
 - Step 7:** Help children follow through on their agreement.

For more information on this process see:

- NebFact 628, *Helping Children Resolve Conflict: Conflict Mediation Model*
 NebFact 629, *Helping Children Resolve Conflict: Pitfalls to Avoid in Conflict Mediation*
 NebFact 152, *Why Children Misbehave*
 NebFact 153, *Consistency in Discipline*
 NebFact 309, *Bullying — How to Stop It*

Reference

- Kostelnik, M., Whiren, A., Soderman, A., Gregory, K., and Stein, L. *Guiding Children’s Social Development: Theory to Practice, 4th Edition*. Albany, New York: Delmar, 2002.

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Index: Family Life Relationships
 Issued March 2005

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