

# Childhood Aggression: Where does it come from? How can it be managed?

**C**hildren aren't born aggressive, they learn it. However, children, parents, and caregivers also can learn how to cope with aggression. This guide answers some questions about aggression and how to teach social coping skills to children.

ag-gres-sion : e\_'gre\_shen, noun

- 1: a forceful action or procedure (such as an unprovoked attack), especially when intended to dominate or master.
- 2: the practice of making attacks or encroachments, especially unprovoked violation by one country of the territorial integrity of another.
- 3: hostile, injurious, or destructive behavior or outlook, especially when caused by frustration.

## Where does aggression come from?

Do humans just have a fighting instinct? Is aggression the outcome of frustration? Most recent studies view aggressive acts not as the sole fault of the individual, but also as related to a set of cultural and social circumstances.

## What factors lead to aggression?

### The child

A child's temperament and his/her learned coping skills are critical to the youngster's being able to manage aggression. Statements such as "boys are supposed to act out their anger" or "she is wild" are common expressions that parents and others use to refer to a child's temperament.

Temperament is that part of the personality that seems to be controlled by genetics. There are basically three types of temperament—easy or flexible (60 percent of children), fearful and sensitive (25 percent of children), and feisty or difficult (15 percent of children).

### The family

The level of family stress and the positive and negative interactions of the family influence children learning aggression. Children model their behavior after adults around them, observing and imitating how others handle their anger and frustration.

### The community

Communities that understand and support children's rights are communities that support children and all their developmental stages. Places where there are supportive adults and healthy alternatives for recreation can protect children while they are learning to deal with many situations, including those that give rise to aggression.

### The environment

Some studies have found that housing, schools, and neighborhoods can contribute to aggression. For example, extreme heat or overcrowding has been shown to increase aggression.

### The culture

What sorts of models are children exposed to on television and in the community? When people try to solve problems with physical violence, children mistakenly learn that this is an appropriate behavior.

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## Why are children aggressive?

Sometimes children do not have the social skills or self-control to manage their behavior. These must be taught. When children can't find the words to deal with aggressive feelings or are not encouraged to express themselves, they become frustrated. At other times, children cannot cope with growing levels of anger in themselves or in others. In both cases, children need to learn acceptable ways to assert themselves and to learn coping skills.

## What does aggression look like in children of different ages?

### Infants

The most common complaint with infants is their crying or biting, both signs of aggression. Crying is one way children talk. They let you know when they are happy (coo and babble) or when they need something (cry). We should find out what they need and provide it, whether it be a dry diaper, food, or warm touches.

### Toddlers

In toddlers, the most aggressive acts occur over toys. To adults it looks like fighting, but to children it's learning how to get along. They have not learned how to say, "Let's play."

The overuse of a "time-out" or a "thinking chair" can cause children to act more aggressively the *next* time. However, turning the incident into a punishment or control by force will only cause the child to think of ways to strike back. It may help to ask the child to rest from the activity that creates aggression.

### Preschoolers

With loving guidance, parents will see children from 2 to 5 years of age decrease their physical aggression as they begin to use words to communicate needs. Knowing what to expect from normally developing children is critical. Here are some tips that can help parents understand what is typical in children:

## Biting as aggression

**Biting** usually occurs in young children who are either teething or showing love. During teething, make sure infants have firm surfaces on which to bite, such as a soft toy, plastic ring, clean washcloth, or clean sock. Often babies want to show affection and kiss, but they get so involved in what little they know about affection that they bite instead of kiss.

When biting occurs, look at the child and say firmly, "No biting! That hurts!" This shows you are not pleased. To prevent the biting, gently steer the child away and say, "I will help you stop biting, Jerome."

**NEVER** bite children back! Young children have not developed empathy and do not know how YOU feel. If you raise your voice because it hurt, they may cry simply because you were loud or had an angry expression. But they didn't realize how you *felt*. They also do not know how to feel sorry yet.

- Preschoolers are self-centered and have not developed all the brain connections needed to see another's point of view.
- Young children see all or nothing. They do not understand that someone is not all good or not all bad.
- Children have a hard time thinking about the future or planning for it. They need concrete guides like picture lists to remember what to do and how to act.
- Young children cannot sort out fantasy from reality and get mixed up about what is real on TV.
- Children with difficult temperaments have difficulty reading the small cues that other children send out in social situations. A 5-year-old may want to join another who is building with blocks. The aggressive child (the one with the blocks) may misread the other's attempt to join his play and view it as a hostile intrusion. He may protect his territory by striking the uninvited child. Even when a teacher points out to the aggressive child that the intentions of the other were not hostile, the aggressive child may have difficulty understanding the situation for what it really is.

### Schoolagers

Between 1st and 3rd grade, most children lose the impulse and need to attack others aggressively. An aggressive child may strike a sibling, but seldom would he or she hit a friend at

school or on the playground. Door slamming and foot stomping may occur at home, but most 3rd graders have enough control to contain themselves at school.

Some children continue to act aggressively between 4th and 9th grade. Boys display aggression in the form of direct confrontations and physical attacks. Girls seldom display physical aggression in this same age range, but they act aggressively by shunning, ostracizing, and defaming others.

Researchers have found that children who are the most aggressive in 4th grade tend to continue to be aggressive thereafter. However, even older children can learn coping strategies and self-control.

### Older children

Even a child who seems to have grown out of his aggressive ways can be provoked when placed in an oppressive environment, for instance, poverty, social disorganization, crowding, neighborhood tensions, or a threatening situation.

Children who have been handled harshly, inconsistently, and with little consideration may have built up anger from lack of love and nurturing. This can lead to mean, hateful, hurtful, and violent behavior in an attempt to strike back.

As children age, they tend to take their lead from peers. Peers, however, can reinforce an aggressor's actions. If peers also show aggression or do not

**Table 1. Ways to help children control aggression.**

Strategy	Pre-schoolers	School-agers	Teens
Use reasoning to explain things.	X	X	X
Accept your child and understand his or her unique temperament. While his/ her behavior will be challenging at times, remain patient and supportive.	X	X	X
Tell your child how you expect him or her to behave. You will need to keep telling the child. Be specific and positive. Rather than saying to your toddler, "Don't hit," say, "Hitting hurts. Please use your words."	X		
Be consistent so children know what to expect.	X	X	X
Organize the home environment; set limits on what the child may use.	X		
Limit access to aggressive toys (swords, guns).	X		
Monitor television for aggressive shows.	X	X	
Watch television with your child, and comment on the content.	X	X	
Provide the child with playthings or activities that give him or her some choices, like puppets and dress-up.	X	X	
Sing songs and tell stories about feelings and frustrations. Talk about what anger may feel like.	X	X	
Allow some independence by providing a <i>help-yourself shelf</i> with blocks, art supplies, puzzles, or other things. Define where children may use these materials.	X	X	
Provide enough materials so children don't have to wait to use them and become frustrated.	X		
Allow transition time between activities; give a five-minute warning that the activity will change or it is "time to come in from play."	X	X	X
Be a model for controlled behavior, and avoid angry outbursts and violence.	X	X	X
Monitor out-of-home activity for older children. Know where they are and whom they are with.		X	X
Avoid extreme permissiveness, laxness, and tolerance OR too much structure and too many demands.	X	X	X
Figure out what the child needs—attention, security, control, or to feel valued. Try to fill the need so he or she won't continue to act undesirably.	X	X	X
Use closeness for control. When you sense your child is about to lose control, quietly and gently move close. Often your calm presence is enough to settle your child.	X	X	
Help children talk to each other to solve problems. Ask open-ended questions to help them think about options to solve their own problems.		X	X
Give children choices so they feel empowered. Offer two acceptable choices.	X	X	X
Redirect your child. If your child is pushing, hitting, or grabbing, move him or her in another direction and into another activity. Stay by his or her side until he or she is positively engaged.	X	X	
Remove the object. If your child is misusing a toy or destroying it in an aggressive manner, remove it. Get out Play-Doh, arrange an interlude of water play, or put your child in his or her sandbox. These tactile experiences often magically quiet aggression.	X	X	
Remove your out-of-control child from the scene. Hold the child, go for a walk, go to another room. Stay with him or her until all is calm.	X	X	
Be your child's control. If your child is hitting another, your words may not be enough to stop the aggression. You must move in and gently but firmly stop the behavior. You provide the control your child lacks. In time, your control transfers to your child. Say, "I'll keep you from hitting your sister."	X		
Note improved behaviors: "I like the way you used words to solve that problem."	X	X	X
Avoid difficult situations. If you know going to the park where there are lots of kids sends your child into an aggressive tirade, avoid going. Find a less-stimulating setting where your youngster can achieve more social success.	X	X	X
Seek support yourself when you need a break.	X	X	X
Be right there. If you have a toddler and preschooler in your home, watch and guide their play to assure interaction stays nonaggressive.	X		
Banish punching bags. If you have a child who is aggressive, realize that the effect of "hit the punching bag, not Jo," has not proven effective for reducing aggressive attacks.	X	X	X
Prepare the child. Before your child meets new friends, tell him or her what behavior you expect. With young children, remind them that people don't like to be hit or pushed.	X	X	

correct aggressive acts, the aggressive behavior is encouraged. Many aggressive children have a network of aggressive friends. Although these clusters may encourage and strengthen antisocial behavior, they also appear to provide friendships and social support.

Even if parents hold off their child's aggressive behavior with firm but not harsh control, other things influence aggression. Neighborhoods, schools, and the media may provide aggressive environments where children witness aggression and violence in a variety of forms daily.

## What can you do?

For young children to outgrow their aggressive ways, they need positive, consistent, nurturing discipline. They need to learn positive problem-solving techniques. Parents and teachers need to place children in environments that offer a setting and support for learning positive social behavior rather than aggressive, hostile, antisocial acts.

## In extreme cases, try some of these options

- Observe to get the facts. Keep a log to find the theme of what triggers the acts of aggression; then help the child steer clear of these activities.
- Share your notes or journal with the parent or caregiver. Compare to see if similar behaviors are triggered at home and at school.
- Take a look at the environment. Is some activity or room arrangement causing anxiety or frustration? Does the child feel crowded, or is he or she made to sit too long? Does the child have enough personal space?
- For school-age children, write a plan of action for what the child will do when the negative behavior occurs.
- Make a list of activities to do "instead" (play with Play-Doh, run around the house, vacuum, draw, take a bath, etc.). Use a picture graph if the child can't read.
- Recognize success. "Even though I could tell you were mad, that was a great way you controlled your anger!"

## Teaching caring behaviors in groups

- In child care, plan a group time to allow each child to share and build a sense of community with his or her peers.
- Plan group rules that include sticking together, no hurts, and having fun.
- Say something positive about each child every day.
- Midday circle time can help children to regroup and will allow children to tell what they have been doing during the morning.
- Children who help plan their learning and choose their own activities will feel more in control, and they will feel more competent.
- Plan transitions. Music, fingerplay, and poems are all signals to change activities smoothly.
- Really listen when children speak. Seek to understand the message behind their words.
- Teach the child deep breathing and visualization relaxation exercises.
- During a calm time, talk with the child so he or she understands the consequences of actions. Bedtimes are often quiet times for talking.
- If all of your strategies have been used to no avail, seek counseling or assistance in developing a child/family plan to learn aggression management.

## Summary

Behaviors are learned, and aggression is a learned behavior. When children are young, the foundation is set for the ways they will shape their personality and behaviors. Parents and caregivers who use patient, consistent, firm, and loving guidance can learn to shape a child's ability to cope with his or her anger and aggression.

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## Related North Carolina Cooperative Extension publications and Web sites

- Childhood Years: Ages Six Through Twelve*, FCS-465  
[http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/child6\\_12.html](http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/child6_12.html)
- Focus on Kids: The Effects of Divorce on Children*, FCS-471  
<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/effectsdivorce.html>
- Growing Together: Infant Development*, FCS-459  
<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/grow.infant.html>
- Growing Together: Preschooler Development*, FCS-454  
<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/grow.preschool.html>
- Helping Children Cope with Stress*, FCS-457  
<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cope.stress.html>
- Parenting Teens*, FCS-422 (PDF)  
<http://www.nccc.org/Parent/parent.teens.html>
- Setting Limits for Young Children*, FCS-455 and FCS-456  
<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/limits1.html>  
<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/limits2.html>

Prepared by

**Karen DeBord**, Child Development Specialist, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

5,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$1,176.00, or \$.23 per copy.

Published by

**North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service**