

Aggression

What to do about hitting, biting & other aggressive behavior

It is not uncommon for young children to sometimes bite, hit, and scratch. Children who have not yet learned other ways to express their emotions may behave that way often.

Most children grow out of that kind aggressiveness fairly quickly. But that does not mean you should ignore such episodes of bad behavior.

A 2-year-old child who is very aggressive in a group – one who always takes things away from others and knocks them down when they defend themselves, for example – may not know how to stop. In those cases, parents need to step in.

Older children who hit may not have learned better, non-aggressive ways to respond to difficult situations. Parents need to teach them and curb aggressive behavior before it gets out of hand.

On Back

How to teach your child that hitting, biting, and other aggressive behavior is not acceptable.

You & Your Child

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What to do about hitting, biting & other aggressive behavior

Watch your child for clues

Watch your child and learn as much as you can about your child's aggressive behavior.

- Who does your child hit or bite? Only one friend? You? Or is your child aggressive with anyone who happens to be around?
- What seems to cause your child to react aggressively? Anger? Frustration? Excitement?
- How does your child express anger? With words or through aggressive behavior?
- Does your child watch television shows or videos that are violent or contain a lot of aggressive behavior? Does your child act out the aggression he or she sees?

The answers to these questions will help you find the best ways to curb the problem behavior.

Limit opportunities

Try avoiding times when your child is the most aggressive. For example, if your child cannot play in the sandbox without hitting or throwing sand, make the sandbox off limits for a little while.

Say no to violent TV programs, videos, and games

Some TV programs and video games portray violence as a way to solve problems and depict characters who use violence to achieve their goals as heroes. This sends the wrong message to your child.

Studies show that young children tend to behave more aggressively after watching violence on television.

Do not allow a young child to watch those kinds of shows or play video games that require players to kill or hurt game characters in order to win.

Teach that aggressive behavior is wrong

Teach your child calmly that biting and hitting are not acceptable.

Try taking a young child – 18 months to 2 years of age – in your arms and calmly say, “I don’t like hitting and neither does anyone else. You just can’t hit.” Be consistent. Do this each time you see your child being too aggressive.

Older children – ages 2 to 3 years – may test you to see what your reaction will be. It is one way they learn what is and isn’t acceptable. Try telling your child up front what the rules are. For example, before play, remind him or her that other children do not like to be hit and that you do not want that to happen.

Words work better

Teach your child he or she can solve problems much better by using words. Tell and show your child that using words is the acceptable way of solving problems and that hitting or other aggressive ways are not acceptable.

If your child doesn’t speak or has a limited vocabulary, label your child’s aggressive behavior using a very firm tone. For example, “No spitting,” “No hitting.”

Never bite or hit back

Don’t lose control when your child behaves aggressively. Children learn from their parents behavior. Don’t encourage what you are trying to stop.

So never hit or bite back.

Seek professional help if behavior gets out of control

If nothing you try seems to help curb your child’s aggressive behavior, or your child is hurting other children, discuss your concerns with your doctor or another professional.

