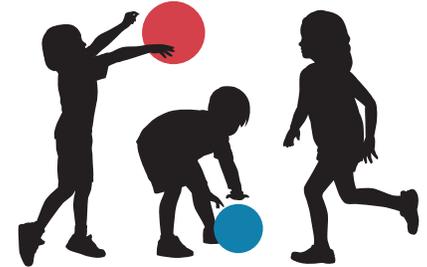


# AGGRESSION IN PRESCHOOLERS

(3-5 YEARS OF AGE)



Noticing aggressive behaviours in your child can be distressing for parents, but it is important to know that even young children can be aggressive and that this aggression can lead to problems at home and in school. Aggression can be physical or relational (social). A description and examples of how preschoolers can be physically and/or relationally aggressive are found below.



## PHYSICAL AGGRESSION

Although physical aggression occurs in most preschoolers, it usually decreases as they age. However, some preschoolers may continue to be aggressive or increase their aggressive behaviour over time. This is why it is important for parents to monitor their children's aggression and get involved in teaching children not to use aggression. Parenting that is hostile, which can include using harsh discipline (e.g., spanking), may contribute to a child's continued physical aggression over time. Being consistently warm and supportive while setting firm limits is important to help reduce your preschoolers' physical aggression.

1. Biting
2. Kicking
3. Pinching
4. Pushing
5. Pulling hair
6. Taking others' place on the playground

## RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Relational aggression is hurting others by damaging or harming their friendships or social status (popularity). By preschool age, these types of behaviours are already common between children and their friends. Although relational aggression can often go unnoticed, it has serious consequences for children. Relational aggression is associated with difficult friendships, behaviour problems, and school difficulties in older children and adolescents. It is important for parents to take note of instances of exclusion or teasing and get involved in teaching children not to use this kind of aggression. Parents can help by having regular, open communication and talk with their children about how this type of aggression can be harmful to others.

1. Teasing
2. Gossiping, telling 'secrets'
3. Excluding peers from games and activities
4. Taunting
5. Name calling
6. Embarrassing/humiliating someone in front of others

## **PARENTING TIPS: HOW TO DEAL WITH AGGRESSION IN PRESCHOOLERS AND HOW TO PREVENT IT FROM GETTING WORSE?**

**Once aggression is detected, it is time to act!  
Below are some tips to help counteract your  
child's aggression:**

### **1. Monkey see, monkey do!**

Contrary to the old saying, “do as I say, not as I do”, set a good example for your preschooler. When conflict arises, do not behave aggressively toward or in front of your child – they will follow the behaviours you model. Research shows that children who watch an adult use violent behaviour will be more likely to imitate this behaviour both when the adult is, and is not, around. When you are upset (which is inevitable, we are all human) talk about your frustrations with your child and explain how you manage your negative emotions. In addition, children are not only aggressive with their friends or at school; siblings may also be physically and relationally aggressive toward each other. Younger siblings may even learn to be aggressive from their older siblings. Monitor your child's behaviour at home with other family members. If you see aggressive behaviour taking place, it is a good time to talk about why it is important not to be aggressive or use aggressive behaviour.

#### **Illustrative example**

If your child's older sibling frequently pushes him/her out of the way or takes their place in line on the playground, your younger child may learn the same behaviour and use it with their friends at school. Model appropriate behaviour by teaching your older child how to be considerate of others when playing and your younger child will pick up on it also.

### **2. Let's talk about emotions!**

Learning to identify and express emotions is an essential skill for preschoolers to develop. In order to develop this skill, parents should talk with their children about their emotions and help them to recognize emotions they experience on a day-to-day basis.

#### **Illustrative example**

When another child takes your child's toy away and he/she begins to cry, take this opportunity to discuss the situation with them. Even if you do not see this kind of situation unfold, but rather your child tells you that it happened, ask them questions about what it is that makes them cry or how they are feeling. Avoid asking questions with yes/no answers. Open-ended questions (i.e., those that do not require only yes/no answers) are helpful in getting information. Help your preschooler label the emotions they are experiencing and acknowledge that it is okay to feel that way. You can also do this by reading stories with your child and asking questions about how the characters in the book are feeling.

### **3. Toys are important.**

Many studies have found that playing with violent toys and/or videogames can increase your child's aggression. Before purchasing toys or games, be sure to know the functions of these toys to determine if they are appropriate for your child.

### **4. Sharing is caring.**

Teaching your child to take turns in game play or day-to-day situations can help them manage conflict with other children. Learning to take turns and sharing teaches patience and cooperation, and these are important skills in helping to reduce aggression.

**5. Make believe.**

Pretend play gives preschoolers the chance to test different emotions, including anger and aggression. By taking part in your child's pretend play (for example, become a character in the play), you can be involved in developing solutions without physical or relational aggression. You can also show your child how to deal with problems the characters have; for example, label the negative emotion(s) and encourage your child to talk about how he/she feels with another character.

**6. Storytime!**

When having story time with your child, try to incorporate situations in which the main characters get frustrated. Work together with your child to decide how the characters in your story will respond to various negative situations. For example, if the main character is mad at their friend, you can suggest that this character takes a few deep breaths before taking any action. This will help children learn to take others' perspectives and to think about how to react in various difficult situations. You could also read stories specifically written to help with the exploration of children's negative emotions (see list of books provided below).

**7. Express yourself!**

Avoiding situations that make your preschooler angry or aggressive is not always possible and not always the best strategy. In cases when these feelings arise, it is important not to shy away from dealing with this experience together with your child. Let your child know that you understand how difficult this is for them and make it clear that you experience similar emotions from time to

time. If possible, allow them some time to calm down, by asking them to take a few deep breaths. You can also ask them questions about what they are feeling, to help them learn how to identify and express their emotions. You can also encourage them to channel their aggression into more adaptive behaviours. For example, into physical activity. Learning to talk about angry feelings is a good alternative to aggression.

**8. Laughter is *not* always the best medicine.**

Sometimes, a child's aggressive or angry response to a situation may catch you off guard and may seem amusing. Parental response/reactions should be appropriate to the child's behaviour, especially when considering how important it is to teach children to use less aggression. Attention, even attention to negative behaviour, can make the behaviour occur more frequently.

**Illustrative example**

In response to a simple request, your child may stomp off dramatically and slam the door. You may be inclined to want to smile, giggle, or laugh. However, responding this way may in fact encourage this negative behaviour in the future; your child may think that slamming the door is something that amuses you. Instead, the message you want to send should be that it is not ok to slam the door when you are upset or frustrated. Explaining this to your child rather than giving them negative attention by laughing at aggressive behaviour is a better and clearer parent response.

**TAKE HOME MESSAGE**

Parents play an influential role in aggression and bullying by:

- Being aware, involved, and taking action
- Communicating and listening

This role is important for early prevention and intervention

## GUIDELINES FOR PARENT ACTION



### GREEN LIGHT

#### Proceed as normal, typical behaviour

If you recognize aggression in your child, for example, if your child bites his/her sibling- explain that this behaviour is wrong and then continue to monitor the behaviour.



### YELLOW LIGHT

#### Proceed with caution, at-risk behaviour

If the behaviour begins to concern you (e.g., becomes more frequent), if controlling your child's aggressive behaviour is difficult, or is interfering with daily functioning (e.g., something is different about your child's daily routine or different about how your child is behaving), parent action should be taken. Try some of the techniques described above.



### RED LIGHT

#### Stop, problematic behaviour

If your child's aggression persists or has become bullying behaviour, seek help from professionals (e.g., pediatrician, psychologist, mental health professionals at your community health centre).

For similar and more detailed information see The Hincks Dellcrest Centre website:

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/The-Angry-and-Aggressive-Child/Anger-and-Aggression>

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/The-Angry-and-Aggressive-Child/Bullying>

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books for Children

**Anh's Anger** by Gail Silver. *Age Range: 4+*

**When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry** by Molly Bang. *Age Range: 3-7.*

### Hands Are Not For Hitting

by Martine Agassi. *Age Range: 2-8.*

### No Hitting!: A Lift-the-Flap Book

by Karen Katz. *Age Range: 2-3.*

### Teeth Are Not for Biting

by Elizabeth Verdick. *Age Range: 2-5.*

### Further reading for Parents

#### Your Defiant Child:

#### Eight Steps to Better Behaviour

by Russell A. Barkley and Christine M. Benton

#### The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children

by Ross W. Greene

### Other Resources

#### iPad App: The Grouchies

by Debbie Wagenbach, application developed by the American Psychological Association. *Age range: 4-8.*