

Notes Home

Aggression

"According to developmental theory, aggressive impulses or drives are born in the human child and are a crucial aspect of the psychological life force and of survival. In the course of healthy development, these drives are normally expressed in various behaviors at different ages and, with assistance from parents and others, are gradually brought under the control of the individual—moderated, channeled and regulated but by no means stamped out. We expect that young children who are developing normally will display aggressive behavior—both physical and verbal—toward adults, other children, and objects in their environment." —Sally Provence, M.D. | Yale University Child Center

It has been our experience as educators that all children, without exception, experience aggressive feelings. In some children this emerges as physical aggression: hitting, pushing, biting, kicking, tackling, grabbing, or hair pulling. In other children it comes out verbally: tantrums, yelling, name calling, or I hate yous. In others it takes the form of destructiveness: dumping toys, hurling food, or taking a scissor to the curtains. In still others aggressive impulses come out through their play and their interests: fascination with monsters, weapons or superheros.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that these aggressive tendencies are a normal and inevitable part of a child's early development. These things are true of young children:

- They have very few outlets for their many strong emotions.
- They have not yet been socialized to channel productively their anger, their sadness, their frustration, their jealousy, or their fear.
- They do not have the vocabularies to express complex emotions.

Notes Home

- They do not have good impulse control.
- They do not have the perspective to understand how their aggression hurts others, either physically or emotionally.
- They do not have the judgment to generalize from situation to situation, to apply previous reprimands to new situations.

All of these skills, which allow children to better manage their feelings and behavior, are ones that are learned gradually over time. Parents can feel reassured that the child who has tantrums or hits or crayons on the walls at two years old will most likely not grow up to be a five year old who does these things.

Because every child's temperament is different, children can experience and release aggressive impulses in very different ways. Because every parent is different, the response to aggression in each home will be different. Our task at school is to find some uniform approach to handling aggression that will protect all children, encourage the development of each individual, and allow for the productive functioning of the group.

It is usually physical aggression that is the most troubling for parents, and this is with good reason. You want to feel that your child is safe at school. You want to know that if your child hurts another child, she will be fairly disciplined. You also want to know that if your child is the one who is hurt, he will be supported and comforted. Of course, the safety of each child is the teachers' primary concern as well.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that even the child who never lashes out physically at others does have many of the same feelings and

Notes Home

impulses; she just has a different way of coping with them. Behaviors like tantrums, grabbing, throwing, rough hugging, block-crashing, etc. often come from the same root source as biting, hitting, or pushing. Another strategy a child may use for coping with aggressive feelings is to hold all of them in. There are some children who hold things in so much that they become withdrawn or inexplicably anxious. It is important that any approach to handling aggression be beneficial to all children, not simply those whose aggressive impulses are most obviously manifested.

Furthermore, we do not want to have an approach to handling aggression that addresses only each aggressive act in the moment. Aggression is linked to so many other primary issues of this age group such as control, independence, self-esteem, social interaction, language development, and emotional expression. Any strategy for the handling of aggression must be part of an overall philosophy about what children need, how they learn, and what they can reasonably be expected to do given their developmental stage.

Keeping all of this in mind, here are six main strategies we use to handle aggression in the classroom:

1. Clear limits. Logical Consequences.

In the classroom, children quickly become aware that we have rules. Crackers must be eaten at the table. Water stays in the water table. Used paper towels go in the garbage. You must wait your turn to go down the slide. There are logical, but hardly dire, consequences for breaking these rules. If you bring your cracker to the rug and make a mess, you have to clean the crumbs with a broom. If you spill water on the floor, you dry it. If you leave your paper towel on the floor, you go back and pick it up. If you throw sand, you have to leave the sand table.

Children must be familiar with the concept of limits in order to be able to start setting limits on their own behavior. Children at this age see themselves as the center of the world. It is through these simple rules that they become

Notes Home

socialized, that they begin to see themselves as part of a group in which the members have needs just as they do. Each child learns, over time, "Sometimes I can do things just the way I want. Sometimes I can't."

Children must also have predictable and logical consequences that motivate them to make good choices. Having to clean up a pile of cracker crumbs is a good way to motivate children to keep their crackers at the table. One reason that we have no Time Out Chair is that we do not believe that there can be just one punishment for all misbehaviors.

Limits are not important only as a means of stopping "bad behavior." They are a necessary part of the culture of any classroom, prerequisites for the peaceful functioning of the group and the safety and freedom of each individual. Creating an environment in which there is order, routine, fairness, and compassion goes a long way toward preventing aggressive outbursts and also makes them simpler to manage when they do occur.

Even in a classroom with clear limits and logical consequences, children still do hit (AND bite, AND push, AND scream...). However, the rules about these behaviors and the consequences that follow them are part of a whole context of classroom life. While we want a child who hits to learn to stop hitting (a short-term goal), we also want her to internalize a sense of kindness, fairness, and friendship (a long-term goal).

2. Use what we adults know about each child to predict and avoid aggressive incidents.

If we notice that a child tends to have screaming tantrums only at the end of her school day, we might guess that she is tired at that time and have her spend it reading quietly with a teacher. If a child suddenly begins biting other children shortly after his new sister is born, we might bring out some books about new babies and talk with the child about the pros and cons of siblinghood.

Notes Home

If we know that two strong-willed children typically duke it out over toys, we make sure to have a teacher close by whenever the two play together. If we know that a child doesn't like to be crowded, we will make sure that she has plenty of room on the rug at singing time so that she doesn't need to push other children away.

Young children cannot be expected to know their own limitations. They cannot usually say, "I had an awful night's sleep last night, and I'm cranky, and I feel like kicking someone." However, we adults can put them on the road toward that self-knowledge with a few choice words and bits of support: "You seem really tired to me, and it's making it hard for you to play without hurting people. I'll bring you to the rug and we'll do a puzzle quietly together so that you can rest."

Of course, our primary concern still is immediately stopping any hurtful or destructive behaviors. While we work hard at helping children identify their strong feelings, we do not allow these feelings to become excuses for hurting others or disrupting classroom life.

3. Validating and giving outlets for the expression of feelings.

All children experience strong feelings, both positive and negative. The more strategies they have for expressing these feelings, the less they will feel the need either to lash out or to withdraw as a way of managing them.

We draw pictures for children about how they are feeling. We encourage them to hammer the playdough or punch a pillow to get their angry feelings out. We name their feelings for them when possible: "You didn't want your mom to go, and now you're feeling really sad and maybe mad too." We give them ways to work productively through those feelings: "Let's look at mommy's picture for a minute. Then we'll write her a note telling her that you miss her."

We also validate the feeling even when we forbid the behavior: "You are mad because John knocked your building down. You can be mad, but I will not let

Notes Home

you hit." Or another example: "You really want that rolling pin, but I cannot let you grab. I will give that rolling pin back to Bill, even though I know it will make you angry." Or another example: "You were scared that Ann was going to take your truck and you pushed her. I won't let you push. Give this other truck to Ann and then you won't have to worry anymore."

It is important to note here that we do not treat emotions as excuses for inappropriate behavior. No child should learn that her anger or sadness or fear gives her license to be hurtful or destructive. In order to be effective, the naming and validating of feelings must go hand in hand with careful limit setting and logical consequences for misbehavior (see strategy #1).

4. Encouraging the use of simple language to solve problems.

We have a few pat phrases that we encourage children to use. We try not to say, "Use your words!" because often children can't remember what "their words" are in the heat of the moment. Here are some of useful phrases for all children to know:

I'm using that.
I want a turn.
Move over.
I want one.
Give it back.
Stop.
Let go.
I need help.

5. Encouraging a sense of competence.

The more confident children feel, the less they let their emotions rule their behavior in the moment. Think about your own experiences as an adult. Think about how you feel when you are in a situation in which you lack confidence, in which you are unprepared or overwhelmed, in which you have that sinking

Notes Home

feeling that things are getting out of control. At these times you are probably most likely to be irritable, depressed, anxious or some unpleasant combination of the three.

We encourage children's sense of competence by creating many opportunities for success and independence. We involve them in cleaning up, teach them to put on their own coats and shoes, make materials accessible so that they can get things out and put them away, etc. Even potty training is a confidence booster which often wipes away a great deal of early childhood aggression.

Confidence building of this kind also helps children avoid being the victims of other children's aggression. Some parents express a desire to teach their reserved child to "fight back." We always suggest instead things like letting him pour his own milk or choose his own clothes or learn to swim. Activities that increase your child's confidence in his own talents and abilities go a long way towards preventing him from being a victim.

6. Being a good model.

We teachers try our best to practice what we preach to the children. We speak respectfully to one another and to the children. We use calm tones of voice. We talk about our feelings ("I am so mad because we've lost another puzzle piece. I really hate it when that happens!"). When faced with a problem, we think out loud about a good solution. When we handle something badly, we think and talk about how to do it better next time. When we make a mistake, we try and fix it. We believe that children use whatever models they have. We are the children's best example that strong feelings are acceptable and that they can be expressed appropriately.

We do not hope or expect that these strategies can make our classroom free of hitting, pushing, temper tantrums, grabbing, toy dumping, war play, or any of the other behaviors associated with aggression. Instead, we work to make this intimate and well-supervised setting a place where children can confront their many strong feelings and impulses and learn to gain mastery over them. We

Notes Home

expect that this kind of emotional growth will serve children both in their future school settings and throughout their lives.

Meredith & Kate