

Toddlers and Young Children Who Show Aggression

Infants push, pull and exert force against one another naturally in the first year. This is a healthy sign of assertiveness and outwardly directed energy. The nine-month old infant who pulls your hair does not know that it might hurt.

By the second year the child develops awareness that he is angry at someone and can behave with intentional force. Even so, he doesn't know enough about cause and effect to understand the consequences of his actions. When your toddler smashes a cherished item, he is feeling assertive though he cannot anticipate the results.

If your four-year-old has frequent aggressive outbursts and seems not to be concerned about the effect of her aggression, or even seems to enjoy hurting others, you are correct in being worried and in seeking ways to help her move toward healthier behavior.

Children who feel loved want to please their parents most of the time and will respond to their guidance. Putting reasonable restrictions on your child's behavior is part of loving him or her, just as are feeding, comforting, playing and responding to his or her wishes.

Ask yourself what might have happened that set your child off—your behavior or that of another person, or something else in the situation; perhaps he is overtired or not feeling well physically. Being rushed, abruptly handled, being denied something she wants, even being unable to do something he has tried to do with a toy or physical activity can produce feelings of frustration and anger.

Make use of what you know about your child's temperament, rhythms, preferences, and sensitivities. For example, if you know that he is irritable or ill-humored for the first hour of the day or gets very out of sorts when tired or hungry, you won't pick that time to ask a great deal in

the way of control. Tell your child what you want her to do or not do in a specific situation. Try not to give a long lecture. Your child will be aware of your displeasure from your tone of voice as well as from what you say.

When your young child is playing with other children, keep an eye on the situation but try not to hover. What begins as playful scuffling or run and chase or sharing toys can quickly move into a battle between children, and they may need a referee. However, there are times when you can let young children work things out among themselves. Age makes a difference, of course.

When your child is being aggressive in ways you don't like, stop the behavior and give him something else to do. You may either suggest and help start a new activity or perhaps guide him to a place where he can discharge aggressive feelings without doing harm to himself, to anyone else, to toys, or to the family pet.

When time permits, demonstrate how to handle a situation in which there is conflict between children. Children need specific suggestions and demonstrations from adults in order to learn that there are effective ways to handle disagreements that are more acceptable than physical attack and retaliation.

If your child has language skills, help her explain what she is angry about. If you are able to guess and she cannot say, do it for her, e.g., "I guess you're mad because you can't go to play with Jenny. I know how you feel, but it's too late to go today" (or whatever the reason is).

Remember: Parents are the most important models of behavior for their children.