

Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers

Get Started Before It's Too Late!

Give Them an Advantage in School... and Life!

What's the "bottom line" about chronically aggressive toddlers and preschoolers? Without powerfully effective intervention... before they enter kindergarten...the odds are very high that they will experience repeated failure in school and face a life filled with frustration and disappointments. The odds are also very high that they will inflict a great deal of emotional and physical pain upon others. These are strong words for a serious issue. Let's not beat around the bush and pretend that little tykes who chronically punch, kick, bite, or display any other aggressive behavior will simply grow out of it. Time is of critical importance here! Listed below are three important facts agreed upon by experts on this issue (for example, see Campell & Ewing, 1990; Offord & Bennett, 1994; Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995.):

- Potentially long-term aggressive behavior can very accurately be identified in children as young as age three or four.

- This antisocial behavior will very likely continue well into adulthood if intervention has not stopped it by the end of the third grade.

- Early intervention in homes, schools, and communities is the critical key to preventing aggressive toddlers and preschoolers from becoming violent teens and adults.

Despite these frightening facts, there's good news! Based on the wonderful research conducted over the past quarter century, we now have an excellent understanding of how to prevent early aggressive behavior from becoming a lifelong pattern. The remainder of this article is devoted to taking a closer look at the essential components of effective early intervention.

What can we do on a daily basis to help young children adopt peaceful...rather than painful...behavior?

Begin intervention as early in the child's life as possible.

Time can be our biggest ally... or our biggest enemy. If we begin intervention very early, the odds are quite high that we'll be successful. In contrast, research shows that if a child is still chronically aggressive at age nine or ten the odds of successful intervention are extremely low (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995). Don't waste time thinking that any aggressive child will simply "grow out of it."

Limit exposure to television and videos.

Do I really need to say much here? Do we already know from decades of research...and common sense...that little ones copy what they see? Can we really ignore the negative effects of children viewing unhealthy behavior on television or in videos? (For research on the topic, see NIMH, 1982; Liebert & Sprefkin, 1988; Huston et. al., 1992.)

Unfortunately, common sense just isn't as common as it once seemed to be.

And don't be fooled by movie ratings or the fact that a television show airs on Saturday morning! There's no substitute for previewing any videos or TV shows your young children might see.

There's another issue here: During the time when it is critical that young children are actively learning about their worlds through movement and play, does it make sense that they are spending time sitting passively in

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I can't assume that this child knows how to behave until I have repeatedly taught them and shown them how to behave. I also can't assume that they will learn it and remember it after I've taught it just once, twice, three times, or more. They will eventually learn how to behave only if I teach them just a small amount at a time and review it over and over again each and every day.

Successful parents and teachers identify specific behaviors they want kids to perform, and they repeatedly model and teach these behaviors, such as:

- How to share
- How to stand in line without touching others
- How to say "please" and "thank you" What it looks like to be helpful
- How to comfort someone who is upset
- How to listen
- How to tell others how you feel instead of acting out your feelings by hitting, pushing, etc.
- How to compromise
- How to comfort yourself when you don't get your way

Young children learn through play. Great parents and teachers of young children teach through play. In the following example, Dad teaches three-year-old Ethan a fun lesson in problem solving:

Dad: (Holding Fred, the stuffed skunk) Uh oh, Fred has a big problem!

Ethan: What?

Dad: His friends are calling him names. They say he smells like a skunk.

Ethan: He IS a skunk!

Dad: Yeah. But it hurts his feelings. What do you think he should do?

Ethan: Maybe bite their noses!

Dad: Oh no. What would happen if he did that?

Ethan: He'd get in big trouble...have to go to his room.

Dad: Yeah. How sad. And then he wouldn't be able to play anymore. What else could he do?

Ethan: Don't know.

Dad: What if he was just silly and said, "I know. I'm very, very smelly. Woooo Weeee!" and played with the other kids anyway?

Ethan: Good! Silly!

And so on...

Systematically attend to positive behavior.

How often does the following vicious cycle develop in the lives of aggressive toddlers?

1. The child hits, kicks, bites, or does something else hurtful.
2. A well-meaning adult quickly gives the aggressive child far too much attention in the form of warnings, lectures, or "punishments."
3. Subconsciously, the child learns that they receive the lion's share of the attention every child craves (albeit negative attention) when they are behaving poorly.
4. The child acts out more frequently to get this attention.

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5. Well-meaning adults quickly give the child even more attention when he/she acts aggressively.
6. The cycle repeats itself over and over again, intensifying with each repetition.

The key to breaking this dangerous cycle involves paying close attention to the child and systematically "noticing" when they are performing the behaviors we want. More specifically, this aggression "antidote" involves the following sequence of actions:

1. When the child is behaving, move over to the child, kneel down, and smile.
2. Look into their bright little eyes.
3. Give them a gentle pat on the back, a "high five," or a hug.
4. Describe the positive behavior you just witnessed, using the format, "I noticed..."

Far too frequently, we heap far too much nonspecific praise upon children. The more specific and precise our description of the behavior, the more successful we will be. For example, "I noticed that you shared the red truck with Jamie" will surely yield more favorable results than, "I noticed you are being so nice and sweet." In my presentations, I often give this tip:

Notice and specifically describe... rather than praise.

Consult with qualified medical and mental health professionals.

Listed are just a few possible causes of aggressive behavior in young children:

- Poor parenting
- Trauma in the form of abuse or neglect
- Brain damage due to closed-head injury, lack of oxygen during the birth process, prenatal exposure to drugs, alcohol, or other toxins, etc.
- Genetic abnormalities
- Other health problems
- Marital problems resulting in family instability
- Observation of aggressive peers

The list goes on.

Wise parents don't hesitate to consult with qualified medical and mental health professionals in order to rule out as many potential causes for the aggression as possible and treat the ones that seem to be playing a role in the problem.

Apply multiple effective interventions simultaneously.

The research is clear. The more helpful things we do to address the problem...and do at the same time... the greater the chances of success (Henry, 1987; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997).

For example, an ineffective plan for Amy, a very aggressive youngster, might involve simply delivering a logical consequence each time she acts out.

An effective plan would involve not only delivering a logical consequence each time Amy acted aggressively, but also many other components, including limiting

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her exposure to TV and videos, modeling and teaching social skills, systematically attending to her positive behavior, adding family therapy, making sure that the home and daycare are “on the same page,” etc.

There's great hope for little tykes who've fallen into the habit of terrorizing their homes and classrooms. That is, as long as the caring adults around them take immediate and decisive action. Please don't fall into the trap of thinking that a chronically disruptive, aggressive toddler will grow out of it. The world can't afford another violent teenager!

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