



Family Front and Centre

A Support Resource
Promoting Healthy Child Development

Book 4

Aggression

- Attachment
- Attention
- Anxiety
- **Aggression**
- Self Esteem



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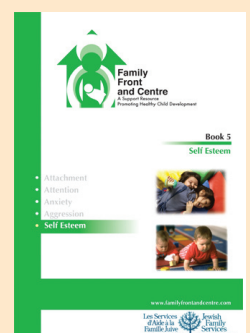
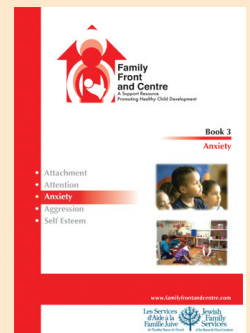
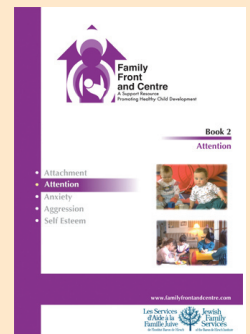
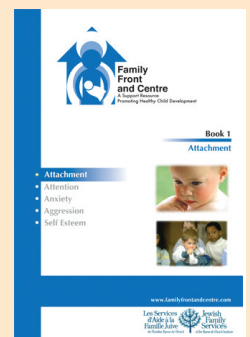
Aggression book 4

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Production of this document has been made possible by a financial contribution from the CAPC/CPNP National Projects Fund, Health Canada.

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ISBN 0-9734557-5-6



What is **AGGRESSION ?**

Aggression can be defined as a hostile behaviour. Aggression relates to feelings of distress and frustration and can be manifested in physical and verbal ways.

Inside this book:

- ↑ A description of the development of aggressive behaviours from infancy until six years of age, highlighting developmental issues for the specific age groups.
- ↑ Factors that affect the development of aggressive behaviours and a discussion of when children may be at risk for more serious aggressive problems.
- ↑ A list of strategies and activities to help children with aggressive behaviours.
- ↑ A glossary of terms.

Infants (0-18 months)

Infancy is a period of self awareness and social and emotional development. Some common behaviours exhibited by infants are not considered aggressive, but instead as angry reactions to situations.

Emotions and Temperament

Infants are born with the ability to make many facial expressions (e.g., smiling and sticking their tongue out), and to engage in many body movements (e.g., grabbing and kicking). They use these facial expressions and movements to express two basic emotional states: pleasure and displeasure.

By 3 months of age, infants can express pleasure through smiling and appearing generally relaxed and calm. Infants can also express displeasure through crying and other behaviours such as kicking, pulling and pushing away, which can reflect an expression of anger or frustration.

Infants are born with different **temperaments** that may affect their expression of anger and frustration. Temperament refers to an infant's basic personality and how they respond to the world. Some infants have relatively calm and passive personalities. These babies are easy to soothe when feeling frustrated. Other infants have more spirited personalities, and become upset easily and are more difficult to soothe. Spirited infants may also react with angry behaviours when frustrat-

ed. While it can be difficult to deal with an infant who is frustrated and expresses his/her discomfort with angry behaviours, most of the behaviours expressed are normal and are not an indication of a serious problem. All infants require patience and consistency in care, while their caregivers require support to effectively deal with these angry behaviours.

Self Awareness

In the first year of life, infants experience a growing awareness of their bodies, actions, abilities, and their environment. By 6-9 months of age, infants become aware that they are able to cause things to happen. When an infant succeeds at this, he/she experiences success and feels pleasure for accomplishing a goal. When an infant does not succeed, the experience can be perceived as negative and the infant may express anger or frustration at his/her lack of success.



Abby, 9 months old, plays with a squeaky toy in her crib. One day, Abby kicks the toy by accident. The toy lets out a big squeak, and Abby feels excitement and enjoys the sound. She starts kicking her legs out again. Again, she kicks the toy and it makes another squeak. Abby continues this foot action until she is no longer interested in the sound that the toy makes.

Abby learns that an action she performs on her own (i.e., kicking her leg at a toy), causes a new and exciting situation (i.e., the squeak sound of the toy). Abby has made a connection between her kicking behaviour and the squeaking sound that results when she kicks her new toy. Abby demonstrates self awareness and success in this new situation.

Juan, 9 months old, starts to crawl. While crawling in the living room, Juan notices his pet cat Miu Miu napping in a corner. Juan tries to get close to Miu Miu, hoping to pet him, but Miu Miu is too fast for Juan and runs into the kitchen. Juan tries to follow, but cannot keep up. In frustration, Juan begins to cry. When his mother goes to pick him up, Juan kicks his legs in anger.

Juan's kicking behaviour is an expression of frustration. He attempts to create a pleasant experience, but does not accomplish it. His goal is to pet his cat, but Miu Miu is not interested and runs away. Juan's goal was disrupted and he expresses anger over his inability to accomplish his goal.

When infants engage in pulling, grabbing, yelling or crying behaviours, they are communicating their needs. They can be communicating physical and social needs (e.g., nourishment, wanting attention and affection), feelings of frustration (e.g., a wet and uncomfortable diaper), or feeling fearful (e.g., being left alone). As infants direct their energy outward, they learn about themselves through their relationships with others and their reactions.

Fourteen month old Cameron has just woken up from a nap and starts crying. His father, hearing Cameron's distress, enters the room and picks Cameron up. Cameron continues to cry and seems uncomfortable in his father's arms. As Dad continues to try and soothe Cameron, he wonders whether Cameron is hungry, and warms a bottle for him. When given the bottle, Cameron flings the bottle away from him. Dad checks his diaper and sees that Cameron needs his diaper changed.

In the example, Cameron tries to communicate his needs in the best way he knows how: through crying and pushing the bottle away. Dad checks his diaper and sees that this is the problem. While his father was not entirely sure of what Cameron was feeling, he tried comforting Cameron and then proceeded to see if Cameron was hungry. While Cameron's dad learned what his son was feeling, Cameron learned that through his actions, his needs could be met.

Infants also experience upset and anger when their goals are blocked. By 10-12 months of age, frustration is felt strongly and expressed in a purposeful and directed way. Some examples of angry behaviours include kicking and hitting. Infants also express themselves emotionally. An open mouth, face pointed downwards, and eyes that are open and intense might characterize an angry face.



Consider This...

Infants use basic forms of communication such as facial expressions, body movements and crying to communicate their needs. Caregivers often have to become highly skilled interpreters of this language to understand their infant's needs. When an infant is upset and expresses frustration, it is important to try to understand what the infant is communicating, rather than focus only on removing the aggressive behaviour.

Toddlers (18 months-3 years)

Toddlers are curious explorers who process vast amounts of information in a relatively short period of time. New experiences lead to the expression of emotions in toddlers, including aggression. It is during their second year that aggression in toddlers is associated with the “Terrible Twos”. Toddlers are known for demonstrating aggressive behaviours when frustrated. While aggressive acts are sometimes considered normal and even age appropriate under certain circumstances, it is not socially appropriate for toddlers to behave aggressively when they cause harm to other persons and objects.

Self Awareness and Independence

Toddlers continue to develop self awareness. Between the ages of 2-3 years, the new experiences toddlers engage in lead them to regard themselves as individuals who are becoming aware of their feelings and reactions towards other people.



David, 2 years old, plays happily in his sandbox when his younger brother Liam comes outside with their mom to play. Liam has recently learned how to walk. As Liam enters the sandbox, he loses his balance and falls on the tower of blocks that David was making. David becomes angry and starts crying and pushing his brother.

In the above example David is distressed because his brother fell down and destroyed his tower of blocks. David’s reaction, which expressed frustration through aggression, is a release of energy for him.

Toddlers’ growing self awareness relates to their growing independence. Independence can lead to defiant and aggressive behaviours especially when the toddler is displeased. Though still dependent on their caregivers, toddlers now have a stronger belief in their independence as a separate individual. This independence may assert itself in the form of **defiance** and aggressive actions.

Intention and Impulsivity

Aggressive behaviours do not only indicate a reaction to a situation, they also demonstrate that the toddler is expressing **intention**.

Davina is 3 years old and has just started attending the 'Parent and Tot' play time at the centre. Davina begins to play by herself in the kitchen area. Another toddler comes by, takes the plastic frying pan that Davina was playing with, and pretends to make breakfast. Davina becomes red in the face, and she starts to hit and bite the toddler's hand to stop her from playing. The toddler starts crying and soon both of their mothers rush to the kitchen corner.

Davina feels frustrated since she was unable to continue playing in the kitchen corner. She is upset and expresses her anger directly and intentionally through hitting and biting the other child. Davina's behaviour is an example of acting with intention. Another toddler took the toy that she was playing with and Davina intentionally hits and bites the toddler to relieve her frustration. While Davina's aggressive behaviour is intentional, sometimes toddlers express their frustration in a more generalized way, such as a tantrum.

Biting and hitting behaviours are not acceptable in toddlers, but at this stage it is difficult to reason with them. Toddlers may act **impulsively** and aggressively to express their frustration without realizing that they are hurting another individual. Although Davina may have intended to hit the other child that does

not mean that she understood she was hurting the other child. Toddlers do not have full control and understanding over their behaviours and are just beginning to learn about the consequences of their behaviours.

Toddlers' limited language abilities make it easier for them to express their frustrations through actions rather than words. If they are unable to find words to communicate their feelings, toddlers will find another outlet to communicate, possibly in the form of aggressive behaviours.

Egocentrism in Toddlers

Toddlers have difficulty understanding other people's points of views. This difficulty is called **egocentrism**, meaning that toddlers are more concerned with their view and have difficulty understanding another's perspective.

Sonnhilde, 3 1/2 years old, realizes that her favourite toy train is not in her room. She becomes frustrated when she is unable to find her toy and begins to cry out angrily. Her father goes to see what the problem is and attempts to comfort Sonnhilde. Sonnhilde exclaims, "I want train!" and proceeds to hit her father's arm. Her father tries to calm Sonnhilde down, telling her that he does not know where the train is but will help her find it. She remains frustrated, and continues to hit her father.

Sonnhilde is upset because her favourite toy is missing. Sonnhilde hit and hurt her father to express her frustration. Even after he stated that he did not know where the toy was and would help her find it, she remained frustrated and continued to express herself aggressively. Sonnhilde did not see her father's perspective on the issue; she was absorbed with her frustration and expressed herself through crying and hitting.

Toddlers have difficulty understanding other individuals' points of view, as their views are egocentric. When talking to them, toddlers may have difficulty feeling **empathy** towards others when frustrated.

Consider This...

For toddlers, the journey to independence is a trail that has many highs and lows. Since they are young and inexperienced, how caregivers react to their successes and failures teaches them how to enjoy feelings of accomplishment when they succeed and also how to appropriately express their angry emotions when they do not reach their goal.



Preschoolers (3-6 years)

Preschoolers are growing cognitively, emotionally, and socially, and have developed more sophisticated language skills to communicate their needs. However, preschoolers may still deal with their frustration through physically and verbally aggressive behaviours.

Misunderstanding Social Cues

Preschoolers, like toddlers, have difficulty understanding the perspectives of others (i.e., egocentrism). They also have difficulty understanding that there can be multiple perspectives towards an issue and may have difficulty interpreting others' behaviours as **social cues** on how to behave in situations.

Adrien, 4 years old, plays at the community centre with his dad. A new boy has started visiting the centre and is excited to play with the dinosaurs that Adrien has carefully lined up. The new boy exclaims, "Wow! These are the best dinosaurs. Can I play too?" and rushes toward Adrien, picking up dinosaurs and examining them. Adrien yells, "Don't touch my dinosaurs!" and starts pushing the new boy away.

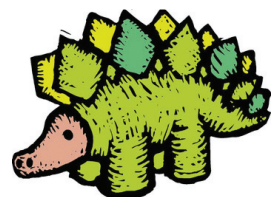
Adrien is distressed when the new boy starts playing with the dinosaurs. From Adrien's perspective the new boy is a threat to his playing situation. Adrien sees that the new preschooler has taken

the dinosaurs he had so carefully lined up. The new child is impressed with the dinosaurs and interested in joining in on the fun. He is not aware of Adrien's perspective. Adrien's aggressive reaction is an impulsive act spurred on by his anger towards the new child's behaviour. He did not view the other child as joining the play situation, but read the situation as a hostile intrusion.

If preschoolers feel that they are being threatened, they may act aggressively in order to defend their play situation. This form of defence may involve inappropriate hitting or shoving of the other child. Below is a list of aggressive behaviours that preschoolers often engage in.

- Grabbing
- Pushing
- Hitting
- Scratching
- Calling people names
- Yelling

Some aggressive behaviours are considered physical, whereas others are verbal. **Physical aggression** refers to aggression that involves physical actions (e.g., biting, hitting, pushing, and shoving). **Verbal aggression** occurs in verbal actions (e.g., teasing and name calling).



Social Development

Preschoolers start to develop an understanding of other people's points of view through the new social relationships they develop. The roots of empathy develop, which is the ability to feel and experience the emotions and thoughts of others. As preschoolers get older, they begin to meet new people their own age, particularly if they attend a day care, preschool, or community centre on a regular basis.

Meeting friends can be exciting, but it can also be stressful. Some preschoolers have trouble communicating and playing well with other children. Misunderstandings often occur, leading a preschooler to feeling rejected by his/her peers, and feeling frustrated.

Eunyoung has recently moved to a new neighbourhood (this is the third move this year for her family) and visits the local community centre with her parents for the first time. While Eunyoung has met preschoolers her age (5 years) before, she has not had enough time to make friends. This has made meeting new children stressful and frustrating. She often refuses to cooperate with game rules and tries to control the game. When this does not work, the new friends usually stop playing with Eunyoung and she runs to her mother for comfort. Eunyoung has also started hitting and yelling at other preschoolers who do not follow her rules of play.

Social networks are gaining in importance for preschoolers. Since Eunyoung has had to move frequently, it is difficult for her to establish meaningful relationships. This has been frustrating and upsetting for her and she has begun to express her frustration through aggressive actions.



Consider This...

Like pieces of a puzzle, preschoolers have unique views of situations and sometimes their views do not fit well with other points of view. If the pieces do not fit, preschoolers may experience frustration and act out aggressively. Caregivers should help preschoolers find their place in the puzzle to help them deal with their frustrations.

Factors That Affect Aggression

Health Factors

There may be health factors that impact on childhood aggression. In some cases, children may be in pain and/or discomfort because of an illness. This can lead to feelings of distress as well as irritability. Children may also feel frustrated that their illness is preventing them from engaging in activities that they enjoy. Based on these feelings, a child may express their irritability and frustrations through aggressive behaviours.

Environmental Factors

There can also be factors in children's environments, such as their home and child care centres, which can lead to aggressive behaviours. For example, there can be stress factors in the home environment that can negatively impact on children. Family issues such as marriage difficulties or events such as losing a loved one or moving to a new neighbourhood can lead to feelings of distress and frustration. Children may express their feelings with aggressive behaviours like hitting and biting. Understanding the child's living situation helps one understand how stress factors can negatively impact the child and contribute to aggressive behaviours.

Caregivers can influence children's aggressive behaviours. Caregivers who display aggressive behaviours act as role models for aggressive behaviours. When a caregiver engages in a behaviour that is aggressive and there is no repercussion for that aggressive behaviour, the child learns that expressing oneself aggressively is an acceptable behaviour.

Caregiver styles of interacting can have an impact on aggressive behaviours. Caregivers who react harshly to a child's behaviours and/or criticize contribute to feelings of frustration and aggression in children. Caregivers need to set clear rules and consequences for children to know what consequences will follow certain behaviours. Caregivers who also engage in inappropriate and/or inconsistent discipline may lead to frustration in children as these types of discipline patterns are unpredictable and do not show respect to children. Caregivers are important references for children.

Children may also be exposed to other persons in their environment who model aggressive behaviours. If the role model receives no negative consequences for his/her aggressive behaviour, the child learns that aggressive behaviours are acceptable.

Personality Factors

There may also be personality characteristics that contribute to aggressive behaviours, particularly once children are school aged. Children whose personalities are more spirited (e.g., active, easily irritated, and difficult to soothe when they become upset) may have more behavioural problems when they reach school age.

Related to aggressive behaviours in the school years are children who have impulsive, inattentive, and hyperactive behaviours such as intruding on others' activities, difficulty waiting for their turn, and talking more than normal. These children are less likely to receive encouragement and support from caregivers and educators. Instead, they may receive punishment for their behaviours in school and may experience social isolation and peer rejection. Social competence is important for children as they interact and develop peer relationships. Social isolation can become a stressor for children, leading to aggressive behaviours in reaction to their social deprivation.



When Aggression is a Serious Problem

Aggressive behaviours in children can become a serious concern during the preschool period and on occasion during the toddler period. It is important to be aware of and keep track of aggressive behaviours if they appear problematic, and any serious aggression problems should receive the help and guidance of a health care professional.

Children who have serious aggressive behaviours frequently have trouble expressing their angry feelings in non destructive ways (e.g., discussing their feelings, playing with safe objects to enact their angry feelings). Instead, these children express their angry feelings by harming themselves or others. These children also demonstrate aggressive behaviours intensely (i.e., well above normal occurrences of feeling frustration and energy typical of the same aged child).

Aggressive behaviours are also associated with oppositional and defiant behaviours, where children have difficulty with listening to and following authority. The following lists oppositional and defiant behaviours to be aware of if they occur frequently and intensely :

- Child often loses his/her temper.
- Child often argues with adults.
- Child frequently defies the rules or refuses to comply with the rules.
- Child often seems angry and resentful.
- Child often has great difficulty following rules.
- Child frequently engages in deliberate arguing with peers and adults.

Strategies and Activities

The following information contains strategies and activities to help infants, toddlers and preschoolers when they behave aggressively. Some of the following strategies can be used with infants, toddlers and preschoolers, while others are specific to one age group. All of the strategies and activities can be modified to suit the child's as well as the setting's needs.

Strategies and Activities for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

1. Regular health and developmental check ups.
 - Sometimes children may have health problems that cause them to feel distress and act aggressively. For this reason, children must regularly see a healthcare worker such as a doctor or nurse.
2. Help caregivers to understand their child's temperament and personality.
 - Educate caregivers about the existence of differences in temperament.
 - Ask caregivers questions about their child's personality, including a discussion of their:
 - a. Routines.
 - b. Levels of crying.
 - c. Moods.
 - d. Activity levels.
 - e. Reactions to change.
 - f. Levels of frustration.
 - Use the information above to explore possible changes in routines and in the home environment that could accommodate the child's needs.
3. Make changes in the physical environment to help soothe children.
 - Sometimes the way a room is set up may contribute towards feelings of frustration and aggression. Create an environment of calmness when children feel distress.
 - Use soft lighting.
 - Have soft and lightweight toys on hand.
 - Using rooms that are open and allow for smooth transitions between activities may lead to lower levels of frustration and may help some children with coping.
4. Establish rules and routines.
 - Rules and routines teach children acceptable behaviours.
 - Try to carry out these rules and routines in the home environment as well as in

- other environments that the child goes to (e.g., play group, community centre).
- Work with the caregivers to come up with a reasonable set of rules that are simple and specific so that the child follows them at home and during the program (if applicable).
5. Acknowledge positive behaviours.
 - Recognize successful behaviours and help encourage positive behaviours.
 - Be consistent in acknowledging positive behaviours.
 6. Discourage less desirable behaviours.
 - Be clear which behaviour is less desirable and why the behaviour is not desirable.
 - When less desirable behaviours occur, tell the child that the behaviour is unacceptable and that there is a consequence for the behaviour.
 - Do not label the child, but label the behaviour (e.g., "Hitting others is not nice" instead of, "You are not nice to hit others.>").
 - Children benefit from consistent logical consequences when they do not follow the rules.
 - These consequences should be carried out in the home and other care environments (e.g., play group, community centre).
 - Consequences work best when they are simple, specific, and consistent so that the child follows them at home and during the program (if applicable).
 7. Be aware of any caregiver behaviours that may be aggressive towards toddlers.
 - Sometimes adults send mixed messages to children by being aggressive themselves while reacting to situations.
 - Let other adults know that children observe many of their behaviours and may look up to them as role models.
 - Caregiver behaviours may reflect cultural differences. Consider taking a cultural sensitivity workshop in order to understand cultural differences better.
 8. Follow the ABC's when observing behaviours.
 - The ABC's (antecedents, behaviours, consequences) is based on a behavioural model of observing and understanding behaviours. The following may help you to understand a child's aggressive behaviours.

A. Antecedents

What are the events that happened before the aggressive behaviour occurred?

- Who was involved?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?

B. Behaviours

What did the child do or not do in the situation?

- Describe all of the behaviours that occurred (e.g., verbal and physical actions) with the child and anyone else involved.

C. Consequences

What occurred after the behaviour?

- What type of intervention was used?
- How did the caregivers/peers respond?
- How did the situation end?
Did the behaviour continue, gain intensity, or stop?
- How did the child respond?

9. Support caregivers with children who behave aggressively.

- Encourage caregivers to support one another by sharing experiences and discussing different techniques and strategies.
- Ask the caregivers about their own developmental history. Sometimes earlier experiences of caregivers may affect the care they provide their children.
- If a caregiver experiences a stressful situation, a referral to an agency or support group may help.

Infant Strategies and Activities

1. Attend to infants' needs promptly and consistently.

- Encourage caregivers to meet their infant's needs as soon as the infant communicates them. If an infant's needs are met quickly and consistently, he/she will develop a strong sense of trust in the caregiver.
- Consistency in caregiver responses leads to the development of trust and comfort.

2. Help infants to orient themselves and feel less distress with new experiences.

- Have caregivers introduce new objects or challenges to the infant so that they can learn new routines.
- Introduce the new experience in small steps.
- This can be done through games so that the infant perceives the experience as initially fun. Examples of games include playing peek-a-boo and singing songs. By helping the infant become more comfortable with the new experience, this encourages the infant to develop future patterns that will lower his/her distress levels with new experiences.

Toddler and Preschooler Strategies and Activities

1. Respond appropriately to aggressive behaviours immediately or soon after the aggressive behaviour occurs.
 - If aggressive behaviours still occur, respond appropriately and immediately.
 - The longer one waits to deal with the problem, the longer the time between the aggressive action and its consequences. This may decrease the amount of understanding that the child will take from the situation.
2. Explain the situation to the child.
 - Provide a clear and concise explanation as to why the aggressive behaviour is not appropriate.
3. Create a safe and calm environment.
 - Give the child a time period after the aggressive behaviour and/or tantrum to relax and calm down.
 - Acknowledge the child's feelings in the situation. Use statements like, "I understand that you became upset when he took your toy, and you felt angry."
 - Remove the child from the situation.
 - Younger children can also be redirected (i.e., removing the child from the aggressive situation or removing the object that contributed to the aggressive situation) by giving children something else to do.
4. Let the child identify his/her feelings.
 - Help the child use words to communicate his/her feelings of frustration.
5. Help the child regain control over their emotions.
 - Children need to know that there are appropriate ways to express anger. A physical alternative could be an area where children can be more physical without hurting other individuals (i.e., a cool down area).
 - Children with aggressive behaviours can also play with objects or perform activities to enact their frustrations (i.e., role play).
 - Examples include: ripping up a newspaper, running off some steam, listening to soothing music, rocking in a soft chair, playing with a toy that is specific to enacting out their frustrations.

SUMMING IT UP

- ↑ Infancy is a time of self awareness and emotional development. Infants are born with particular temperaments and use facial expressions and body movements to express feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Infants become self aware and learn that they can create pleasurable experiences for themselves. If they are unable to reach their goal, they may express anger and frustration.
- ↑ Toddlers are constant explorers who are learning more about themselves and their environment. They are becoming independent and may act with intention, impulsivity and defiance in some situations. Though toddlers use language more frequently, they still have difficulty expressing themselves and will use aggressive behaviours when they feel frustrated. Toddlers are also becoming increasingly social, though they have difficulty understanding and seeing other individuals' points of view (egocentrism) and feeling empathy towards others, especially in the heat of the moment.
- ↑ Preschoolers are learning to become effective communicators but are still egocentric in their views. They are learning to read the different social cues of others, but may still have difficulty reading other children's social behaviours, which often leads to conflict. Preschoolers may engage in physical and verbal aggression.

GLOSSARY

- Aggression:** A feeling of hostility that is acted upon; hostile behaviour.
- Defiance:** Acting in a rebellious manner, defying authority figures.
- Egocentrism:** The tendency to see one's personal perspective on an issue and have difficulty understanding the perspectives of others.
- Empathy:** The ability to experience the thoughts and emotions of others.
- Impulsive behaviours:** Behaviours that are easily prompted, highly intrusive, and lack a demonstration of patience.
- Intention:** To act with a sense of purpose.
- Physical aggression:** Aggressive acts that are physical actions (e.g., biting, hitting, pushing, and shoving).
- Social cues:** Physical and verbal actions by others that serve as a reference to a child for interactions with others.
- Temperament:** Infant's basic personality and how they respond to the world; usually established by 2-3 months of age.
- Verbal aggression:** Aggressive acts that are verbal actions (e.g., teasing and name calling).