

Anger and Aggression in Children Teaching Self-Control

Anger and the aggressive feelings that often follow are a normal part of all our lives. The difference between a healthy declaration of anger and an act of aggression is the action that is harmful to another person, animal or thing.



Life is Frustrating

Young children lead challenging lives. They have to learn everything - how to crawl, eat with utensils, drink from a cup, walk, talk, open a door, be nice to everyone! The learning never ends and it can be very, very frustrating. When their frustration reaches levels they can no longer manage, they have what we call 'tantrums'.

Tantrums

When your child is in the throes of a full-blown tantrum, realize that she is beyond reason. You can't argue her out of the tantrum. A child's sense of security depends on knowing that if she loses control, the adults around her won't. Soothe her in the way that works best for her... rocking, stroking, humming, holding. When the tantrum is over, calmly continue with whatever was happening. As a result of the tantrum, don't buy the child something they were asking for if you've already said no. Although it can be very difficult, try not to be embarrassed when tantrums happen in public.

The most important tool a parent has for dealing with tantrums is to avoid them.

Some suggestions:

- Organize your lives so that most of the time you both want the same things;

- Whenever possible, offer choices;
- Avoid placing the child in situations that are going to be difficult for them;
- Have activities, healthy snacks, and toys available for long waits you can't avoid;
- If you need to take them along shopping, make sure there is something in it for them too (e.g. time to play in the ball room at the mall);
- Give warnings: "In five minutes we need to go";
- Explain yourself: "... because Daddy will be home and looking for us"; and
- Don't sweat the small stuff.

Look for Reasons

When a child is behaving aggressively, there is a reason. Look at what is happening in her life. Is there a new baby that she would really like to pinch because mommy is too busy to play? Has daddy been doing more travelling and not been there for bath time?

Genuine Aggression

Biting, hair pulling, pinching, punching, hitting, grabbing toys, hurting animals, breaking things - the list of genuinely aggressive behaviour is long. The effects, however, are all the same - a child who is miserable because his behaviour makes him unwelcome. He needs your help.

Start by staying nearby when he plays. Pretend to be doing something else but keep watch. As soon as you see him behaving aggressively, act quickly. Hold his hands and make eye contact at his level. "I know you're angry, but I cannot let you hit. Hitting hurts. I am stopping you now, but soon you will be able to stop yourself before you do it."

Keep your voice calm and stay respectful. Let him tell his side of the story, "I can see how angry you feel. Please tell me what you're so angry about."

Being treated with respect helps children learn to solve problems by talking, rather than by physical force.

Be patient. You will need to go through this many times before your child learns. It may also be necessary to attach consequences to behaviour. In clear, simple language, warn what will happen. “Jessica, if you throw sand at Jed, you will have to leave the sandbox.” Then, if she throws sand, act immediately and calmly remove her. Never threaten something you are not prepared to carry out, and always do what you say you will.

Time-outs are a technique that many parents find helpful for aggressive behaviour. A ‘time-out’ means that a child is removed from whatever he or she was doing for a short period of time.

Time-outs work best when:

- They happen immediately;
- They are short - suggest the child decides when she is ready to rejoin the group;
- They are very boring; and
- They are not used too often.

Watch Your Language

Remember that it is the behaviour that is bad, not the child. For example, say, “Lorie, it is bad to break your dollhouse,” rather than “Lorie, you are a bad girl.” Also, look for opportunities to give encouragement, “Lorne, you are turning the pages in that book so carefully!”

Alternatives to Aggression

Some children have a great need to work things out physically. They need help finding outlets for that energy. Enroll physical children in sports activities, get them outside and into playground activities as much as possible, or run with them yourself. When they are angry and need to work it out, suggest they punch the couch cushions or pound a hammer into a block of wood or go for a run down the sidewalk. You cannot change their nature or their need, but you can teach them how to act appropriately when they are angry.

Parents are Role Models

Children watch you and they imitate you. The most powerful teaching you will do is by example. If you yell, they will yell. If you handle conflict calmly with reason they will learn this skill too. On the other hand, if you spank, hit or slap them when you are frustrated, you are teaching them to do the same. It is confusing when you hit a child for hitting.

Losing Control Yourself?

Most of us know what rage feels like. We scream and yell and shout and then feel very, very upset about it. How could we have ‘lost it’ like that? If you feel like you are about to lose it, STOP, remove yourself from the situation, and ‘count to ten’. When you can deal with your child calmly, talk to him about his behaviour. What exactly was he doing, what is wrong with it, what should he do instead, and what will you do next time he does it.

This BC HealthFile has presented some ideas to help you with the challenge of parenting. There are other topics in the child development series that you may also find helpful. The BC HealthFiles link and this series can be found on the BC HealthGuide Web site at:

www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm



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