

Preschoolers and Aggression

If your preschooler pushes someone, how can you teach her a better way to get what she wants?



Aggressive behaviour is a normal and typical part of growing up and it is critical for parents to help their children learn how to manage it. As preschoolers get older, they show less and less physical aggression mostly because the parts of their brains that control aggression are better developed.

However, because preschoolers are bigger and stronger, they are capable of more harm when they do get rough.

Preschoolers are also smarter and more calculating. They test their growing independence with strong opinions about what and who they like to play with, and what they like to do. To get their way they negotiate with friends, parents and caregivers. Every day, playmates try to figure out who will have what, who will do what and who can play. Later, they will remember what worked, or didn't. This leads them to choose more indirect forms of aggression and use their increasing language skills to get what they want. They make fun of and exclude certain friends; they tease, taunt, and call each other names. The goal of this type of aggression is to harm another person through insults or isolation.

Comfort, Play & Teach: A Positive Approach to Parenting®

This parenting approach was created to help parents address challenging behaviours like aggression. Comfort, Play & Teach are three simple ideas. When put into action they can have a big effect on your child's development.



Comfort your child

Comfort is the first thing that children need from parents. When you comfort your child, she learns to feel secure, loved and valued.



Play with your child

Play is the "work of children," and you are an essential "partner." When you play with your child, he learns to explore and discover the world and his role in it.



Teach your child

Teach is what parents do to help their children learn. When you teach your child, she learns how to relate to others, solve problems and communicate.

Comfort, Play & Teach Strategies for Preschoolers

Comfort, Play & Teach are the three main components of positive parenting. By using this approach you not only respond to aggressive behaviour, you help your child learn appropriate strategies that will help him meet his needs and interact with others in constructive ways.

Comfort

- **Read stories together about some of the angry feelings or aggressive behaviours your child has shown.** Talk about the emotions the characters are feeling. Ask your child how else the characters might handle their feelings. Remind your child of situations when she felt that way, too. Recall together whether the outcome was good or bad, and what could have made it end better. Preschoolers are capable of learning alternatives to aggression. The more choices your child can see, the less likely she is to act aggressively.
- **Acknowledge your preschooler for positive behaviour, without overdoing it.** Recognizing your child is especially important when he clearly chooses not to act aggressively.

Play

- **Pretend play gives preschoolers the chance to test different emotions, including anger.** If you take part in your child's pretend play you can be right there to explore other ways to resolve those feelings without physical or indirect aggression.
- **Take the lead in making up stories where people get frustrated,** e.g., "Jennifer was playing ball when Jack came and took the ball from her." Encourage your child to make up the next part. Ask, "What do you think Jennifer did?" Decide together how everyone in your story will react. Have your child draw pictures to go along with the story and share them with others. Learning to talk about and share feelings are good alternatives to physical aggression.
- **"Rough and tumble" play is normal in children this age.** It helps preschoolers learn social skills, the boundaries of their strength, and when to stop. However, parents need to monitor children's play. Parents are very important in helping preschoolers master the fine line between rough physical play and physical aggression.

Teach

- **If your child hurts someone, include her in treating the hurt child.** This helps her to develop empathy for others and understand the pain her actions can cause.
- **Help your child learn how to apologize and make up.** Understanding how to take responsibility for hurting someone and taking steps to make things better are critical skills for preschoolers.

- **Be a good role model by managing your own frustrations.** When you are frustrated, share your feelings and talk about different ways you might cope that are not physically or indirectly aggressive.
- **Provide routines that include frequent reminders about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.** For instance, if you go to the park, remind your preschooler that it's important to wait her turn and not push her way into line.
- **Communicate rules and limits and be sure they are age appropriate.** Talk about these daily to ensure that they are understood. Observe, monitor and respond consistently when rules are broken.

Positive Parenting Strategies to Cope with Aggression

- Stay calm.
- Treat any child who may have been hurt by the aggressor.
- Make sure no one is laughing or encouraging the child's aggressive behaviour.
- Try to understand what caused the aggressive behaviour to explain it to each child involved.
- Tell the aggressor why the behaviour is inappropriate and what she can do instead.
- If necessary, apply age-appropriate consequences.
- Be consistent with any consequences, and follow through.

Positive Parenting Strategies to PREVENT Aggression

- **Observe what happened before, during and after aggression.** Look at what triggered it, who the victim was, what the behaviour was, where it occurred, what stopped it, and how everyone felt about it afterward.
- **Be patient, firm, direct and consistent in your directions and requests** regarding your family's expectations on manners, chores, routines, and ways of interacting with others. This helps your preschooler understand and manage his emotions and relationships on a daily basis.
- **Set a good example for your child.** Modeling positive ways to resolve conflict and communicate when emotions are involved has a big impact on your child's development of positive social skills.

Created by Invest in Kids in partnership with

