



gretchen's
house

So you want to know more about...

Aggression

When Push Comes to Shove

Aggression is a learned behavior. By trial and error, a child learns that physical force can be an effective way to get what he or she wants. The good news is, kids **can** unlearn this destructive behavior. Adults must set strict limits and teach children alternative means of getting what they need **and** coping with disappointment.

Infants and toddlers exhibit experimental aggression when they inadvertently hit someone and notice a strong reaction. They try again to see if they can elicit a similar response. This behavior usually stops within a week or two with a consistent and unemotional response from adults. If they get an excited response, however, they learn that hitting (or biting or throwing things) is a powerful tool to get what they want. With children who are 30 months and older, and who should have

some control over their impulses, it is important to note the situations when they are likely to be aggressive. It may be a bid for toys or attention, or it may be that the child is frustrated and unable to express his or her emotions. Some children are simply more physical than others and need help understanding the limits of acceptable contact. Tracking behavior helps teachers and parents understand negative patterns and create effective new ones. We also confer with parents to develop individual action plans.

In addition to **tracking** aggressive behavior, at Gretchen's House we use the following techniques to address aggression:

- Do plenty of **gross-motor activities** to give children **exercise** and help them **blow off steam**;

- Use **sensory play** with sand, water, etc. to **soothe** children and help them **work out stress**;
- **Shadow** children who have impulse control problems;
- **Limit** physical play for children who are invading others' personal space;
- **Role play** problematic scenarios with all children;
- **Model** appropriate expressions of frustration and anger;
- **React swiftly, firmly, and without drama.** "Hitting hurts. When you hurt children, you need to take a break." We keep the aggressive child within reach of a teacher until he controls himself.
- **Focus** our attention **on the victims** of aggression.

NAEYC on Bullies

Children who demonstrate aggression, or "bully" other children may be unable to initiate friendly interactions, express their feelings, or ask for what they need. If these children do not improve their social skills, they will continue to have problems relating to peers throughout their lives. In addition, if other children see that aggressors get what they want through bullying, they are more likely to accept or imitate this undesirable behavior.

from **Early Years are Learning Years**, *Teaching children not to be -- or be victims of -- bullies*, www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/1996/14.htm

Further reading about aggression

- ♦ *Hands Are Not For Hitting* by Martine Agassi, Ph.D.
- ♦ *The King of the Playground*, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
- ♦ *Who's in Control?* by Dr. Lawrence Balter

Scripts for Success

Kids who are bullied need scripts they can use to respond to aggressors. Adults can help them feel powerful by giving them a voice. Teach children to say things such as:

- *You're hurting me. Stop it!*
- *If you hit me, I won't play with you.*
- *I feel angry when you keep pushing.*

Most importantly, teach children to call for **HELP!** when they feel threatened. Embarrassment about being bullied can lead kids to keep quiet, which exacerbates the problem.

Kids who bully other children also need help communicating. Teach them to say:

- *I need help.*
 - *I want to play with you.*
 - *I am scared.*
 - *I'm getting very angry* —before they lose control
- Not only will the child feel more powerful, he or she will be cueing the other children that they should back off or call an adult for help. Making friends is a skill. Kids who bully other children often need to be taught how to approach other children, join a group, and how to compromise.

Passive Aggression

Bullying doesn't only take the form of hitting, kicking, or biting. Some children emotionally manipulate others to get what they want. Less obvious forms of aggression include:

- Name calling;
- The silent treatment;
- Excluding others from playground or creating classroom "cliques";
- Forcing other children to always take subservient roles in play scenarios;
- Passive resistance instead of cooperating in clean-up or other "undesirable" activities.

Kids behave manipulatively when they learn that it is an effective way of getting what they want.

The first step to eliminate passive aggression is to be alert to it. Are children playing alone because they want to, or because they are being actively excluded from activities? Listen to the voices of children at play. Do they sound relaxed, stressed, or defensive? Pay attention at clean-up time. Do some children end up doing all the work?

As with any kind of aggression, retaliation won't help. What will help is giving *other* children more power in social relationships. Give them important jobs in the classroom. Let them pick "teams" or helpers. Coach them through challenging situations. Reward all children when they exhibit the behaviors you're trying to promote.

Frequently Asked Questions

My child tells me he is constantly bullied at the center. Why aren't you doing anything about it?

Sometimes children's reports of what happens to them are inaccurate. One incident, if scary, may become magnified in their imagination. Sometimes children empathize with other children who are bullied and internalize that experience as their own. We'll observe his interactions and let you know what we see and our plans to address it.

Do you ever kick violent kids out of the center?

Yes, if we can't keep the other children safe and/or meet the aggressor's developmental needs. This is a rare occurrence. We seek advice from our consulting psychologist when a situation is this extreme.

How much aggression is too much? Children over 3 years of age should not be **regularly** using physical means to get what they need. Everyone loses control occasionally, but a stomping tantrum in a 4 year-old should not extend to lashing out. Likewise, children over four who *primarily* use manipulative behavior in their social interactions need coaching to build more positive relationships.

I want my daughter to defend herself. Kids first need to learn that violence is not an acceptable way to address conflict. It is hard for children to know the limits of "acceptable" retaliation. Close supervision enables staff to do any "defending" that needs to happen at the center.