

When your child hurts other children

Children sometimes experiment with aggressive acts toward other children, including hitting, slapping, pinching, scratching, poking, pulling hair, biting, kicking, shoving, and knocking down. Since these potentially harmful behaviors are unacceptable in the adult world, they should not be allowed between children. Many children fight when they are angry. They don't like something another child did, and they retaliate. Or they want something another child has and see force as the easiest way to get it. If children get their way through aggression, they will only use it more often. Most children try aggressive behavior because they see it in playmates or on TV. Occasionally, children become excessively aggressive because they receive a lot of spankings at home or witness the abuse of a parent or sibling. Bullying behavior must not be allowed and never be ignored.

The solution is to establish a firm rule: "Don't hit. Hitting hurts, and we do not hurt people." For aggressive behavior, give your child a brief time-out in a boring place. Assign one minute of time-out for every year of the child's age, to a maximum of five minutes. Time-out helps a child learn to cool down rather than blow up when he is angry. If it looks as if your child might hurt someone, intervene immediately. Stop the behavior at the early threatening or shoving stage. Do not wait until the victim screams or is hurt. If a time-out does not seem to be effective, take away your child's favorite toy or TV time for the rest of the day. Give special attention to the victim. After putting your child in time-out, pick up the child who has been injured and give him extra sympathy and attention. It is especially helpful if you can rescue the victim before he is hurt. From the 'perpetrator's' viewpoint, the attention he wanted is now being given to the other child, and that should give him some 'food for thought.' If fighting among your child and certain playmates or siblings is a pattern, make sure the 'victim' isn't setting up the 'perpetrator' in order to gain attention. Monitor the TV shows your child watches and discover the violence they are exposed to. We suggest you watch TV with your children and make occasional comments on good or bad behavior by the actors on TV. Never allow a TV in a child's bedroom, and limit the type of TV shows your child is allowed to watch.

Suggest acceptable ways to express anger. In the long run, you want your child to be able to verbalize anger in a calm but assertive way. Encourage her to come to you when she's angry and talk about it until she feels better. A second option is to teach your child to stop and count to ten before doing anything about her anger. A third option is to help her learn to walk away from a bad situation. Giving a time-out is one way of helping her walk away from anger. Younger children (under 3 or 4 years of age) with limited expressive language need time to develop these skills. When they are in time-out, don't be surprised if they pout, mutter to themselves, yell, or pound on the door of the room. If these outlets for anger are blocked, a more aggressive outburst may occur. As long as the behavior is not destructive, ignore it. Teaching your child how to control anger provides her with a valuable resource. Verbalize your child's feelings for him. If he can't talk about his anger, put it into words for him: "I know that you feel angry." It is unrealistic to expect your child not to feel anger. You may need to make an understanding statement such as, "You wish you could punch your brother, but we cannot hurt other people."

Teach your child acceptable ways to get what she wants. Teach her how to ask or negotiate for what she wants rather than taking it. Teach her how to take turns and how to trade one of her toys for the use of another child's toy.

Never hit your child for hitting someone else. Hitting your child only teaches him that it is fine to hit if you are bigger. If your child tends to be aggressive, it is critical to eliminate all physical punishment, such as spanking. You can use many other consequences to help teach your child right from wrong.

Praise your child for friendly behavior. Praise her for being nice to people, playing with other children in a friendly way, sharing things, and helping others. Remind your child that people like to be treated kindly, not hurt. Some children respond to receiving a treat or a star on a chart for each day they go without any aggressive behavior.

Take preventive measures. Set a good example for your child. Demonstrate self-control and verbal problem solving. Help your child avoid playmates who tease persistently and situations in which he often gets into fights. When your child becomes tired or hungry, leave the play setting until these needs are met.