

PARENTING INFORMATION ON MANAGING CONFLICT, AGGRESSION AND BULLYING

It is challenging for parents to raise children to be safe, well-adjusted and able to deal with conflict and frustrations peacefully and effectively. Children are exposed to violence daily through the media and video games. Too often, aggression is portrayed and accepted as a solution to problems. So how do parents help children deal with violence and prevent them from engaging in aggressive behaviour?

The practical strategies listed below are useful for helping children learn to manage their feelings, behave appropriately and use non-aggressive alternatives for dealing with conflict.

This information covers a range of developmental stages up to early adolescence. While most underlying principles are relevant across ages, parents are encouraged to find age appropriate ways of explaining and reinforcing these principles.

Parenting and disciplining children

Parents want to know how to manage a child's behaviour effectively, without being aggressive or punishing the child. It is important for parents to share positive interactions with children and encourage good behaviour, rather than focusing on challenging behaviours. Parents should establish and adhere to rules in the household that are reasonable, meaningful and appropriate for the age of the child. Parents should manage children's behaviour in ways to help them develop and maintain good relationships with other people.

Some basic principles of effective parenting and disciplining are listed below.

- ◊ Stay calm and model appropriate behaviour,
- ◊ Notice, praise and encourage good behaviour rather than focus on bad behaviour,
- ◊ Establish fair, clear rules and limit them to as few as possible,
- ◊ Involve children when making rules,
- ◊ Form agreements with children rather than impose your will on them,
- ◊ Explain why rules are important,
- ◊ Be consistent in applying rules and consequences,
- ◊ Agree on consequences appropriate for the age of the child, such as:
 - ✓ **Logical consequences** (for example, removal of toy from a pre-schooler if the child is breaking it or using it to damage something),
 - ✓ **'Time-out'** (such as time out for fighting, to give children time to calm down). Time out is not punishment. It is simply a method to teach the child to remove themselves from a situation, self-regulate emotions and reflect. It is useful for children to understand what

they did and reflect on how they could do things better next time. Time-out can involve the child sitting in a chair or on a mat. Time out should not involve confinement, isolation or locking a child away from people. Time out only needs to be for short periods like one minute for each year of age.

- ✓ **Withdrawal of privileges:** includes such actions as taking away something the child enjoys or missing out on a favourite activity like watching television. Withdrawing privileges is more appropriate for older children (perhaps from five or six years of age) who can link their behaviour at one point in time with its consequences.

Punishment is not effective because it:

- ⊖ Models aggression, not problem-solving,
- ⊖ Does not teach children self-regulation,
- ⊖ Does not teach children right from wrong or morale reasoning,
- ⊖ Results in children being afraid to disobey when parents are present, instead they misbehave when alone,
- ⊖ Increases the risk of mental health problems in childhood and adulthood,
- ⊖ Increases the risk they will punish their own children or spouse, and
- ⊖ Is likely to decrease the quality of your relationship with them.

Dealing with children who fight

It is normal for children to have disagreements and experience conflict. People have different needs, wants and ways of doing things. This is what makes them unique. Children need to learn how to handle conflict.

Fighting between siblings

Feelings between siblings are often more intense than a child's relationship with other peers. Sibling interactions offer you an insight into how your child copes when provoked or pressured. Sibling interactions offer parents the opportunity to help their children learn social and emotional skills.

Wrestling and tumbling

It is normal for children to wrestle and tumble with each other in a playful and non-violent way. Join in or supervise their wrestling games. Teach children to look for warning signs in the behaviour of others or themselves that flag when the game is getting out of control and when they should stop. Establish rules for safe wrestling like: 'no biting, scratching, hitting, pinching, pulling hair, throwing things or kicking'.

Agree on signals to stop the game when it ceases to be fun for one of the children such as one person calling out 'STOP' or banging on the floor three times.

Have consequences in place for when the rules are broken such as going to time out to calm down.

Teach children to assert themselves and it is alright not to want to participate in rough physical play.

Angry fights

Children who engage in fights need close supervision by adults to help change the pattern of behaviour. Adults should intervene when they see children starting to become aggressive to help them become aware of what is happening and develop insight. Parents can help children:

- ◊ Become aware of body signals indicating when they are getting upset,
- ◊ Learn strategies to calm themselves down, and
- ◊ Negotiate with their playmates to achieve positive outcomes.

Aggressive behaviour in children

Some children, usually in the pre-school years, bite or kick other children. Often, they behave this way because of frustration or curiosity but it can be distressing for the children and adults involved. Parents can help children learn alternative behaviours in many ways by:

- ◊ Comforting the hurt child and give minimal attention to the aggressor,
- ◊ Explain in simple, clear language that biting or kicking is not okay, and
- ◊ Remind the child to ask for what he or she wants rather than using aggression.

When parents are concerned about aggression displayed by their child despite efforts to change it, seek professional help.

Dangerous behaviour in children

Some children with symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity and/or inattention might repeatedly engage in dangerous behaviour and have difficulty learning to regulate their behaviour to remain safe. Before a diagnosis is made, the children should be properly assessed to identify any underlying causes that can be addressed. If these problems are severe enough, a diagnosis such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) may be made. In rare circumstances, some children who often act in a disobedient, defiant and difficult way may have symptoms severe enough to warrant a diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Parents may need to seek the support of a psychologist. A diagnosis is not necessarily helpful. What is important is to understand the causes and triggers for behaviours and address them through therapy.

Children protecting themselves

Children need to be able to protect themselves, which is different from using violence. Useful strategies for self-protection include:

- Stand up tall,
- Look at the person being aggressive,
- Say 'stop hurting me' ('pushing me, hitting me', etc.) in a strong, confident way,
- Walking or running away, and
- Seeking help and telling someone they trust.

Parents need to help children to practise dealing with difficult situations. Give children feedback on whether they are communicating assertively and coach them until they are confident in their skills.

Bullying

Bullying is when a person deliberately and repeatedly hurts someone else. The hurt can be physical or emotional. Bullying includes teasing, name calling, hitting, pushing, excluding people and teasing. If a child feels scared or hurt when with someone, suspect bullying. Bullying is a form of aggression and psychological violence. Children being bullied need adults to intervene and provide support.

If parents don't know whether their child is being bullied, here are some warning signs:

The child:

- Gets hurt or bruised,
- Is scared or has nightmares,
- Loses or has damaged possessions,
- Puts him/herself down,
- Doesn't want to go to school,
- Has no friends or party invitations,
- Often feels sick, or
- Acts aggressively.



Parents can help their children deal with bullying by:

- Asking their child what is wrong,
- Reminding children that they have a right to feel safe,
- Letting their children know what bullying is and how to recognise it,
- Teaching them that telling about bullying is okay,
- Teaching children how to stand up for themselves (see above),
- Teaching children not to laugh at anyone being bullied, not to join in bullying, not to give a person who is bullying lots of attention and not to leave people out of games,
- Telling the school and requesting action, and
- Seeking help for the child to improve their social skills.

A child who has been bullied can be at greater risk than others of being bullied again (even when the first bully has been dealt with). Children who have been bullied can benefit greatly from additional help, including debriefing about the bullying, and making sure they have the social skills necessary to function effectively at school.

Parents can take steps to deal with children who are bullying others:

- Increase supervision when the child is with other children,
- Explain what bullying is and why it is not acceptable,
- Talk with the child about the impact of bullying on others. Try to get them to understand what it is like for the person being bullied,
- Ask how they would feel if they were being bullied,
- Talk about what they think might help them to stop bullying,
- Show them how to join in with other children in a friendly way (For example: first observe a game and the other children, look for a natural break in the game for joining in, choose a person with a friendly face and ask them if you can join),
- Make clear rules and consequences, be consistent in addressing inappropriate behaviour,
- Praise children when they play cooperatively with others, and

Teaching children about conflict resolution

Children need to learn how to resolve problems without conflict. Good conflict resolution skills can lead to a peaceful solution. The following steps are useful:

- Begin by letting children know it is possible to find a good solution. Parents could say something like: 'I'm sure if we all think about this we might find a way for everyone to get what they want'.
- Help children identify how they are feeling and help them label and express their emotions. (e.g., 'You're looking cross – I'm wondering if you're feeling cross, but also a bit sad and hurt because you can't join in their game').
- Help children to work out what they really want by asking them what they would like to have happen. Help them to work out what the underlying need is, (e.g., 'You say you wish your friend would go away. I'm wondering if you are also wishing that you could help the group build the cubby').
- Help your child to understand the other person's point of view and to learn how to take their perspective. Ask them what they think the other person might be feeling, or how they might feel if they were in the same situation. You could get them to ask the other person to say how they are feeling and what they would like to have happen.
- Together, you could encourage the children to brainstorm different ways that they could solve the problem. Encourage them to come up with several different and interesting ways that they could go about it.
- Help the children to choose the options that they think work best for everyone and get them to have a go at putting them into practice. Stay around to see how they get on and help them fine-tune the solution if needed.
- Reading children books that teach conflict resolution skills through stories can also be helpful.

