

Eyes on

# Aggressive behaviours

You can help to manage them



PARENTS



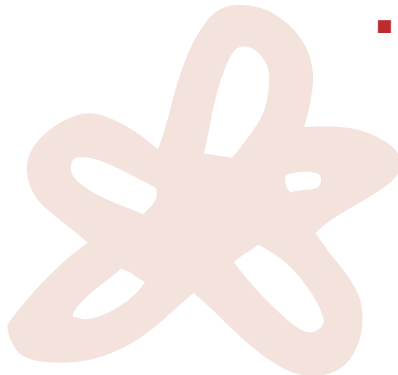
Centre of Excellence  
for Early Childhood  
Development

STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE  
CLUSTER ON EARLY

*child development*



**“Children are better able to control their aggressive behaviours if their brain structures and functions have developed properly.”**



## What do we know?

### From pregnancy to 6 months old

- Children are better able to control their aggressive behaviours if their brain structures and functions have developed properly. Their brain development depends on the quality of prenatal care and on the quality of care and stimulation they receive in early childhood.
- After birth, children first show aggression through screaming and angry faces. This happens when they are frustrated due to thirst, hunger or other discomfort.
- When infants are frustrated or upset some tend to become very angry, some tend to show signs of depression while others appear to be able to calm themselves down.

### Between 6 and 12 months

- As their brain develops and their motor ability increases, children begin to express aggression by biting, hitting, kicking, slapping, pushing or pulling.
- Children often use these behaviours in a playful way with toys, adults and other children. However, they will also use them in response to frustration or to get something they want.

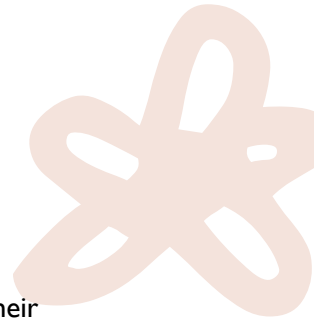


***“Toddlers are much more likely to use physical aggression, even those raised in the best environments.”***

- In such cases adults should react calmly, but clearly show their disapproval. Because young children do not understand what they are doing, adult disapproval, with time, will help them understand that they need to control these behaviours when frustrated.
- Most children who receive good care in a supportive environment will learn over the next two to three years to control aggressive behaviours and express anger and frustration in more socially-appropriate ways.

### **Between 1 and 3 years**

- Toddlers are much more likely to use physical aggression, even those raised in the best environments.
- Before the age of 3, most boys and girls will at least sometimes use physical aggression when they are frustrated or when they want something that someone else has.
- Hitting and grabbing toys from another child are the most common forms of aggression. Some children will bite occasionally and most will throw a few temper tantrums during the toddler years.
- Boys tend to use physical aggression more often than girls, and girls will usually reduce the frequency of their physical aggression sooner than boys.





***“In the preschool years parents and caregivers play an important role in helping children learn to control their emotions and to find alternatives to physical, indirect and verbal aggression.”***

### **Between 3 and 5 years**

- By the end of age 3, most children will start to reduce their use of physical aggression.
- As children’s brains develop, they gain better control over their emotional reactions and learn to use alternatives to physical aggression.
- For example, they will ask for a toy they want instead of grabbing it from the hands of another child. They will also withdraw from a social situation when they get angry.
- However, around the age of 4, boys and girls will also start to use indirect and verbal aggression. For example, they may say bad things about a friend to another child or use words to insult another child.
- Girls learn indirect aggression sooner than boys and use it more often.
- Indirect and verbal aggression can be just as hurtful as physical aggression.
- Children use less aggressive behaviours as they learn to control their negative emotions and learn to use language to resolve conflicts and express their needs.
- In the preschool years parents and caregivers play an important role in helping children learn to control their emotions and to find alternatives to physical, indirect and verbal aggression.
- With your support and by interacting with other children your child will learn to NOT use physical aggression and to use socially-acceptable behaviour instead.

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

**During pregnancy**

... what you and your partner need to do to have a healthy pregnancy.

- Eat a healthy diet and get sufficient rest.
- Avoid stress.
- Stay away from smoking, alcohol and other toxic substances.

**From birth to 12 months**

... when your child is frustrated.

- Be gentle and comfort your child.
- Provide a stimulating environment (i.e., face-to-face contact, singing songs, smiling and speaking to your child).

... when your child starts biting and hitting.

- Be aware that once your child has a few teeth he may bite indiscriminately.
- Be aware also that once your child learns to control his hands and arms he may hit things and others.
- As soon as he starts to hit or bite, begin to teach him that it's a no-no in a firm but gentle way. Get his attention by saying "Ouch!" or "No!" with a serious face. Keep in mind that you may have to repeat this many times over months for the behaviour to end.
- It is important to start caring and firm discipline as soon as the biting and hitting start, otherwise it will become harder with time to change old habits.

## Paying attention to...

## What can be done?

### From 1 to 3 years

... an increase in frequency of aggressive behaviours.

- Be warm and attentive. Reinforce good behaviours and discipline when needed.
- Make sure that your child does not benefit from aggressive behaviours in any way.

... how other children and adults respond to your child's aggressive behaviour. For example, do they laugh or tolerate it?

- Make sure that interactions between children are always closely supervised.
- Be present and aware of what is happening. Good observation is the key to effective supervision and intervention.
- Apply age-appropriate discipline that promotes learning (for example, saying sorry to each other, consoling the victim, repairing any damage done, etc.).

### From 3 to 5 years

... the decrease of physical aggression and the use of indirect and verbal aggression.

- Let your child know that indirect and verbal aggression is not acceptable. Explain that it is just as hurtful as physical aggression.
- Learn to recognize these forms of aggression (for example, refusing to be friend, ignoring someone, or using hurtful words toward another person).
- Help your child find other ways to deal with his anger or frustration. For example, encourage him to calm down and to use words to express his needs.
- Use conflicts to teach your child how to reconcile with others.

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

**From 3 to 5 years (cont.)**

... how your child's social skills are developing and how well he is able to control his emotions.

... how consistently the adults in your child's life supervise and intervene when he shows aggression (for example at home and in child care).

- Show your child how to control his emotions and behaviours and encourage him to communicate well. For example, help your child identify emotions and match feelings with words.
- Help your child learn about the needs of others.
- Be sure other adults in your child's life have the same expectations and use the same approach to discipline.
- Make sure children have enough supervision: Aggression has to be seen in order to be stopped.
- Avoid putting children with behaviour problems in the same group.
- Avoid isolating a child who has poor social skills. Integrating him will help him learn from others.



# Information

This information sheet is a publication of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development (SKC-ECD). These organizations identify and summarize the best scientific work on early childhood development. They disseminate this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of aggressive behaviours, consult our synthesis and experts' articles on this topic in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at [www.child-encyclopedia.com](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com).

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In this document, the masculine form is used merely to simplify the text. No discrimination is intended.



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