

# A Aggressive Behavior

Children who are aggressive are not born that way. Their education in the use of force may begin at home, where their parents may model aggressive behavior as a way of solving problems. Their children may learn from an early age that the way to get what they want is through force. They may be taught to respond to challenges with confrontation and to express themselves with their fists rather than with words. The message they receive is “might makes right.”

Children also learn aggressive behavior from the media. The amount of violence they are exposed to on television is simply astounding. By the age of fourteen, a child will have seen as many as 11,000 murders on television. Research indicates that children who see violence frequently on television may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and may view aggression as an acceptable way of solving problems.

Children who are aggressive in school present a substantial challenge for teachers. An aggressive student can engender a climate of fear in your classroom, creating anxiety among your students and distracting them from their schoolwork. The student who is the cause of this fear also warrants your concern. His behavior may signal that he is a troubled child and may cause him to be shunned by his peers. Moreover, his aggressive behavior in childhood may be a harbinger of later problems as an adolescent and adult.

Your task in working with an aggressive student is to help make your classroom a safe haven by furthering two goals: (1) making it clear to your students that aggressive behavior will not be tolerated and (2) helping the student develop more appropriate ways of interacting and settling disputes with his peers. In responding to the student, avoid harsh punishment or humiliation. Disciplining him severely may only fuel his anger and make him more determined to continue his aggressive behavior.

## What You Can Do

- 1. Make it clear that aggressive behavior is unacceptable.** At the beginning of the year, when explaining your class rules, state clearly that students are

not allowed to hit or push under any circumstances. You might let them know the consequences for aggressive behavior. Reinforce this rule during the year as necessary. Encourage your students to tell you immediately if they observe any physical conflicts.

**2. Make sure your students know that you will protect them.** If you observe a student physically harassing another student, take immediate action to stop it. Putting an end to this behavior is important, not only to protect the student but to send a message to your other students that you will not tolerate this behavior and will do whatever is necessary to ensure that your classroom is a safe haven.

**3. Be assertive in breaking up a fight.** If two elementary school students are engaged in a fight, use a strong, loud voice to stop it. For example, you might say, “Seth and Matthew, break it up right now. Move away from each other.” If that does not work, you might want to say something odd to divert their attention. For example, you might say, “Look up. The ceiling is falling.” You could even think of a comment in advance. If they do not stop and you cannot separate them, have another student go to the office to request help. If a crowd of children is gathering, insist that they move away or sit down, perhaps clapping your hands to get their attention. After the incident, meet with the students so they can give you their versions of what happened and you can resolve any lingering problems. Also notify the parents.

**4. Respond calmly but firmly to the student.** Speak in a firm, no-nonsense manner to stop a student’s aggressive behavior, using physical restraint as a last resort. In responding to him, pay attention to your verbal as well as nonverbal language. Even if he is screaming at you, remain calm. Allow him to say what he is upset about without interrupting him and then acknowledge his feelings. Avoid crossing your arms, pointing your finger, or making threats, all of which will fuel his anger and stiffen his resistance. You might say something like the following: “I understand that you are angry, and maybe

you have reason to be upset, but hitting is not the way we deal with problems. That behavior is not acceptable. If there is something you are unhappy about, you have to use words to express it, not your hands.”

**5. Consider removing the student.** You may conclude that a student’s aggressive behavior warrants separating him from the rest of the class, either to protect your students or to send him a strong message that what he did merits a serious consequence. You can do this by giving him a time-out in class or sending him to the office. If you give him a time-out, act quickly and firmly while saying to him, “You know the rule: no hitting. You need to go to time-out.” In the time-out area, have him sit in a chair and instruct him to remain quiet. Tell him he can return to the class activity after a set number of minutes. If he leaves the chair or acts in a disruptive manner, tell him that the timer will be reset to zero and he will need to stay in time-out longer. If you decide to send him to the office, call the principal to inform her of the incident and alert her that the student is on his way. When he returns from his time-out or his trip to the office, welcome him back, perhaps reminding him of the rule about aggressive behavior, and then look for opportunities to praise him for appropriate behavior.

**6. After the child cools down, talk with him privately.** Although he may expect you to react punitively, surprise him by reacting supportively. Express your confidence that he can resolve problems without being hurtful to his peers. Tell him that you think he must be upset about something to lose control as he did and that you want to understand what may be bothering him. Your effort to connect with him may encourage him to open up to you. If he does, listen attentively without interrupting him. Speaking in a calm voice, tell him that you understand why he was upset but stress that he has to find a way to express his anger with words rather than with his hands. Let him know that his behavior will cause classmates to fear him and avoid him as a result. Focus on what he can say and do differently next time to avoid responding in an aggressive manner.

**7. Try to identify when and where the student is aggressive.** Look for a pattern in the incidents so you can anticipate their occurrence and take steps to avoid them. You might want to jot down some information on these incidents, noting when they occurred, what activity was going on at the time, who was the target of his aggression, what happened right before and right after the incident, and how others responded. Through this behavioral assessment, you can help determine what triggers his behavior, what reinforces it, and most important, what to do about it. For example, your assessment may tell you that a student is often aggressive while lining up to go to lunch. If so, you might ask him to be the door holder or to hold some folders as he stands in line to inhibit aggressive behavior.

**8. Seek parental support.** Invite the parents of an aggressive student in for a meeting to apprise them of his behavior and obtain their perspective. Ask them if he acts similarly at home and what they think is contributing to this behavior. You may want to inquire about his exposure to violence in the media, namely, in the television shows he watches and the computer and video games he plays. If a concern, encourage the parents to limit his exposure to these violent images. Also find out what disciplinary strategies they have found successful with their child and what suggestions they have for dealing with him when he is aggressive in school. After agreeing with them on a plan for managing his behavior, bring the student in and let him know the details. Make sure he hears his parents say that they disapprove of his behavior and support your approach with him in the classroom.

**9. Have the student apologize.** Although you do not want to force him to say he is sorry because this may only fuel his anger, you want to strongly encourage him to make amends with the student he hit. If he is willing to do this, it will help soothe hurt feelings and avoid future conflicts.

**10. Teach your students conflict-resolution skills.** Children may resort to aggression because they lack the words or skills to solve problems with their classmates. Help them learn to resolve peer conflicts without acting aggressively

by teaching them the basics of talking things out: staying calm; allowing each person to have his say without being interrupted, blamed, or put down; using “I messages” to convey feelings; and considering the other’s point of view. Designate an area of your class as the “peace corner,” where your students can go to settle conflicts. If two students are having a conflict, tell them to go there to talk it out and to come to you when they are finished to inform you of their solution. With young elementary students, you may want to use puppets to teach conflict-resolution skills. Puppets are effective in holding their attention and helping them see a problem from different points of view.

**11. Require students involved in a conflict to fill out a behavior form.** After they have calmed down, have the students complete a form that asks them to describe what triggered the conflict, how they behaved, and how they could have handled the situation differently. Meet with the students to discuss their responses. This form provides a record of the incident that you can use when meeting with their parents and also helps them learn to reflect on and modify their behavior.

**12. Send the student to a “cooling-off” place.** Tell the student that when he is feeling frustrated and on the verge of acting out, he should tell you he needs to leave the room. Then send him to an area you and he have agreed on as a cooling-off area. This might be the rear of the classroom, the library, the classroom next door (ask the teacher if this is okay), the bathroom or water fountain, the guidance counselor’s office, or the main office. Suggest he bring something with him to help calm him down, for example, a book, an art activity, a toy, even a class assignment. Tell him he can return when he is feeling more in control. Be certain he understands that this is not a disciplinary measure but a way of preventing a problem. Make sure he does not abuse this privilege by leaving the classroom whenever he wants.

**13. Have the student engage in activities that make aggressive behavior less likely.** When he appears tense, suggest tasks that allow him to release frustration such as drawing a picture, working with clay, taking a walk, writing

in a journal, or squeezing a ball. You may want to give him an item to carry or suggest that he put his hands in his pockets during times when he is prone to using his hands inappropriately or is feeling on the verge of an outburst.

**14. Appeal to the student's desire to gain the approval of his peers.**

Help him understand that when he lashes out at a classmate, he has been manipulated into acting in a way that makes him look foolish or weak to his peers. Suggest that the way to impress his peers is to show them that he can control his temper rather than be manipulated into losing his cool.

**15. Connect with the student.**

An aggressive student may distrust his teacher and view her in an adversarial manner. Try to gain this student's trust by listening attentively to what he says and showing respect for his thoughts and concerns. Find a few minutes every so often to talk with him about his interests and hobbies. Help him start the day on a positive note by giving him a high five or making an upbeat comment when he walks into the room. He may make better choices if he feels supported and accepted by you.

**16. Obtain in-school counseling for the student.**

You might ask the guidance counselor or school psychologist to counsel him. He may need guidance in resolving peer conflicts and finding alternative ways of behaving. He may also need help interpreting the behavior of his peers if he tends to perceive hostile intent when none is intended.

**17. Assign the student community service.**

Giving the student tasks that involve helping others may encourage him to act more sympathetically and less aggressively toward peers. You might have him do the following: serve as a buddy to a learning disabled student, organize a game for students in a lower grade during recess, record acts of kindness by students to help determine who receives school courtesy awards, or help the principal monitor younger students in the lunchroom.

## **18. Consider requesting an evaluation to determine special education eligibility.**

If he has acted aggressively toward peers on many occasions, you may want to initiate a referral to determine whether the student warrants special education. He may need closer supervision and more individualized instruction than you can provide. If he is already classified as eligible for special education, you may want to convene a meeting of the individualized education program (IEP) team (of which you are a part) to revise his program. The team might recommend more special education help or counseling, a one-to-one aide in the regular classroom, or a behavior-improvement plan.

## **See Also**

Angry Outbursts

Bullying

Hitting or Threatening a Teacher

Sexually Offensive Behavior

Spitting

Weapon, Possession of