

From Hitting to Words

The current social climate of zero tolerance for violence has made us very sensitive to physical aggression, even in very young children. Sometimes, parents and caregivers seem to feel that there's something seriously wrong if some toddlers push and shove the other children at playgroup. In fact, it's normal for babies and young children to communicate with their bodies. As part of growing up, they learn that it's not okay to hurt other people and that there are better ways to interact socially.

Is this normal?

A study on a very large number of children in Canada found that "physical aggression starts at about nine months and peaks between 27 and 29 months, when 53.3 percent of boys and 41.1 percent of girls try it out. By about age three, most children learn to use alternative, prosocial strategies rather than physical aggression."¹

For some children, it may take longer. In particular, children who are slow to speak are more likely to hit, bite and grab toys. Until their language skills catch up, they count on action to get their message across.

Minimizing aggression

The toddler who hits or bites at playgroup shouldn't be treated in the same way as the Grade 3 bully who starts a fist fight in the school yard. And a two year old who grabs a toy from a younger child won't necessarily end up intimidating classmates in high school. But parents still can't ignore the behaviour. They can act to:

- prevent the conditions which lead to aggression
- supervise and redirect play where necessary
- teach social skills
- give children chances to practise.

Prevention

Children are more likely to push and grab when they feel crowded, overstimulated and stressed. If you see a child who has trouble controlling physical aggression in a group, check for these factors:

- too many people in a small space?
- a room set-up that encourages disorganized running around? (better done outdoors)
- a high noise level, echoing off walls and ceiling?
- not enough toys for the number of children?
- expectations that children sit still for a long time?
- bad timing in the child's routine? (Children who are hungry and tired lose control more quickly.)

If you can't change the environment or the schedule, maybe you could shorten the time the child spends in the group. But don't give up on all group experiences; progress comes with practice.

Supervision

You may be looking forward to socializing with other parents at playgroup, but don't expect babies or toddlers to manage on their own for long. You need to stay close so that you can see when to join in the game. Sometimes little ones need you to smooth out the rough spots for them. Be ready to pick up your child and start playing with another toy across the room.

With practice, you'll be able to see trouble coming and know when it's time to start a song or bring out the snack. Later, when they are preschoolers, your adult conversations will last longer, but between about nine months and three years old, you need to keep eyes and ears open, for your child and for the others.

Teaching

Gradually, children learn to communicate with language instead of actions. You can help by giving them the words they need to use:

- words for asking - "Now it's my turn."
- words for inviting - "You can play with us."
- words for understanding - "I think Ty wants to play with the train too."
- words for feelings - "That made you really angry!"

You can rehearse some of these words before your child goes to play with others: "If Maria wants to play with the same toy as you, what could you say?"

Practice

At first, your baby and toddler practise taking turns and sharing toys by playing with you. You're more patient than their friends! They will also learn by interacting in a group of other children, especially if they see the same children week after week. They get comfortable together and learn to interpret each other's cues. Over time and with adult guidance, the physically aggressive children gradually start using other strategies; the timid children learn to stand up for themselves.

Learning takes time

Like any skill, learning to get along with other people takes time. Even if learning doesn't go smoothly at first, don't give up. With prevention, supervision, teaching and practice, your persistence will pay off.

by Betsy Mann

¹ *Meeting the Challenge* (1999), B. Kaiser and J. Rasminsky Ottawa:

Canadian Child Care Federation p. 7