

Parent guide to helping children manage conflict, aggression & bullying

Parents face many challenges in raising their children to be safe, happy, well adjusted and able to deal with conflict and frustrations in non-violent and effective ways. Many parents are concerned about the amount of violence children are exposed to – at school, on the television, in video games, and in their communities. There is a risk that certain types and amounts of aggression have come to be accepted and expected as the solution to a problem. A common concern for parents is how to help their children deal with violence, and how to prevent their children from resorting to aggression or being involved in violence themselves.

This Tip Sheet is for parents and carers who wish to learn more about:

- how to discipline a child effectively;
- how to stop sibling aggression;
- how to deal with antisocial behaviour;
- how to deal with bullying, and;
- how to resolve conflict effectively.

Many of the practical strategies contained in this Tip Sheet are useful for helping your child learn how to manage his/her feelings, behave in appropriate ways, and learn non-aggressive alternatives for dealing with conflict.

This Tip Sheet covers a range of ages and developmental stages up to early adolescence. While most of the underlying principles are relevant across the ages, parents will need to find age appropriate ways of explaining, teaching and reinforcing these principles.

Parenting and disciplining children

A common issue for parents is how to manage a child's behaviour in an effective way, without being aggressive or punishing the child. It is vital to have positive interactions with your child that encourage good behaviour, rather than focusing only on difficult behaviour. It is also important for parents to make and keep to some rules in the household that are appropriate for the age of the child and are reasonable and meaningful. It is in the best interests of the child for the parents to be able to manage the child's behaviour in ways that will help the child to develop and maintain good relationships with other people.

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

- Notice, praise and encourage good behaviour rather than focussing on bad behaviour.
- Establish fair rules:
 - Make as few rules as possible and ensure that they are clear;
 - Involve children in making the rules if possible;
 - Form agreements with children rather than imposing your will on them; and
 - Explain why the rules are important.
- Agree on consequences that are 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). A useful rule of thumb is to place a child in time out for increasing amounts of time as the child

gets older, starting, for example, at three minutes for a three-year-old, four minutes for a four-year-old, and so on. Some professionals recommend using a time out chair in the same room as the family, whereas others prefer a room that removes the child from the rest of the family for a short period of time; and

- withdrawal of privileges (taking away something they enjoy, 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 are able to link their behaviour at one period in time with a consequence that takes place at a later time.
- Be consistent in applying consequences.
- Stay calm.

Research shows that physical punishment for bad behaviour does not work as well as other ways of disciplining children.

- If a parent frequently uses physical punishment, children often have trouble learning to control themselves.
- Physical punishment on its own does not teach children right from wrong.
- Physical punishment makes children afraid to disobey when parents are present, and when parents are not present to administer the punishment, those same children are more likely to misbehave (Gershoff, 2002).
- Children who are physically punished have an increased risk of mental health problems in childhood and adulthood, and there is an increased risk that they will abuse their own children or spouse.
- Hitting or spanking your child is likely to decrease the quality of your relationship with them.

Dealing with children who fight

A common concern for parents is how to deal with children who fight or use aggression towards other children, most often towards their siblings. It is normal for children to have disagreements and conflict; people have different needs, wants and ways of doing things, this is what makes them unique. How children handle the conflicts, however, is where problems can arise.

Fighting between siblings

Parents can be concerned about the high levels of aggression and violence they see between their own children, even starting at quite an early age. This can be particularly distressing when the children involved seem to play well with their friends. It is helpful to remember that feelings between siblings are often more intense than in other contexts. A positive way of seeing this is to consider that sibling interactions offer you an insight into how your children cope when pushed to the limit, or when they are under extreme pressure. Sibling interactions offer parents the opportunity to help their children learn the social and emotional management skills they need. Parents can use these fights to help children learn to manage their strong emotions and to learn more effective conflict resolution skills.

Wrestling and tumbling

It is normal for many children to want to wrestle and tumble with each other. Wrestling and tumbling are different from using violence. Parents can teach children how to wrestle and tumble in a safe way.

Join in a wrestling game with them, or supervise their wrestling games and teach them to look for warning signs in themselves or the other person that show when the game is getting out of control and when they should stop (for example the wrestling is getting stronger, the child is feeling anxious, children are starting to try to hurt each other, the other person looks scared or angry, a child's voice changes to a shriek, the laughing and smiling stops, the child's face hardens or changes to determined or angry).

Make up rules for safe wrestling like 'no biting/scratching/hitting/pinching/pulling hair/throwing things/kicking, and get children to agree to them. Supervise to ensure rules are adhered to.

Agree on signals for stopping when the game ceases to be fun for one or other of the children, such as the game ending when one person calls out STOP, or bangs on the floor three times.

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

Teach children that it is also okay not to want to participate in this sort of physical play.

Angry fights

Often parents worry about their children fighting in an aggressive way. Children who often do this need constant and vigilant supervision by adults to help break this cycle or pattern. Adults should watch the child and intervene when they see the child starting to get aggressive, so that they can help the child become aware of what is happening. Parents can help children to:

- become aware of their body signals that tell them that they are getting upset;
- learn strategies to help calm themselves down; and
- plan how to negotiate with their playmates so that the game can continue.

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 a number of ways by:

- comforting the child who was hurt and giving minimal attention to the child who was the aggressor;
- explaining in simple, clear language that biting/kicking is not okay; and
- reminding the child to use appropriate words to ask for what he or she wants rather than using aggression. If the child is unable to express him or herself clearly, the parent can suggest specific words and phrases and help the child to learn the words, such as instructing the child to ask 'Please can I have the ball?'.

Sometimes parents can become concerned about how aggressively their child behaves despite the work they have been doing to help the child behave differently. In this situation, many parents have found it useful to seek professional help for themselves and their child.

Dangerous behaviour in children

Sometimes parents have to deal with situations where their child is engaged in, or repeatedly engages in, behaviour that is potentially life threatening, such as poking things into power sockets or

running across the road. A parent's first responsibility is to prevent the child from coming to harm through:

- close and careful supervision;
- creating a safe physical environment by child-proofing the house and garden, using safety locks and power-point covers, child-proofing fences and gates as appropriate; and
- ensuring other carers are aware of the risks and how to prevent them.

Next, the parent needs to teach the child the rules of behaving safely and ensure that the rules are kept.

- Explain the rules in simple language. For a child who is pre-verbal, a simple 'no', or 'stop' might suffice. Children who are learning to speak can deal with more specific instructions.
- Tell the child exactly what you want them to do instead. For example 'When we get to the kerb I want you to stop walking and hold my hand'.
- Rehearse the new behaviour many times with the child, either through role-play at home, or in real life.
- For slightly older children (aged two or three and upwards), explain what will happen if they don't remember the rule. Logical consequences are most appropriate at this stage.

Some children with symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity and/or inattention might repeatedly engage in dangerous behaviour and have difficulty learning to manage their behaviour and be safe. If these problems are severe enough, a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) may be made. 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 trained in the diagnosis, treatment and management of children with ADHD, ADD, or ODD.

Children protecting themselves

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

- standing up tall;
- looking the person being aggressive in the eye; and
- saying 'stop hurting me' ('pushing me, hitting me', etc) in a strong, confident way.

Parents need to help children to practise dealing with situations they find difficult. They need to give children feedback on whether they are getting their message across assertively and coach them until they are both happy with their skills.

Bullying

Bullying is when a person deliberately and repeatedly hurts someone else. The hurt can be physical or emotional. Bullying includes hitting, pushing, name calling, leaving people out and teasing. If anyone feels scared or hurt when they are with someone, they may be being bullied. Bullying is a form of aggression that can escalate into violence. Children who are being bullied need adults to intervene and provide support.

If parents don't know whether or not their child is being bullied, the following are warning signs that might indicate that their child is being bullied.

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 spot it;
- Teaching them that telling about bullying is okay;
- Teaching children how to stand up for themselves (for example teaching them to look the person in the eye and say 'stop bullying me');
- 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 demanding action;
- Seeking help for their child to improve his/her 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, in particular, 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, and be consistent in addressing inappropriate behaviour;
- Praise children when they play cooperatively with others;
- Consider enrolling the child in a group program that helps children learn to manage their behaviour.

Teaching children about conflict resolution

It is possible for a child to learn how to sort out problems in a way that makes everybody happy. Often though, people deal with conflict aggressively, and try to convince other people that their way is the best by force or argument. Good conflict resolution skills do not seem to be used in most of

the conflicts we see or hear about, (such as in the family home, in films and on television, in the school yard, on the news). However there are excellent ways of dealing with conflict that lead to a peaceful solution.

The following steps are useful in helping children find peaceful ways of solving problems with other people. You can change the way you ask the questions depending on the age of the child, but the general steps are the same for all ages.

- Begin by letting children know that 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 of everyone getting what they want".
- Help children identify how they are feeling, and help them to label and express their emotions. (eg 'You're looking cross – I'm wondering if you're feeling cross, but also a bit sad and hurt, that 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, (eg '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. (e.g., Wise Ways to Win children's story book – see below).

Resources

Australian Psychological Society. (1995). Punishment and behaviour change. Position Paper available from the APS.

Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by Parent and Associated Child Behaviours and Experiences: A meta analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4), 539-579.

Good Australian resources for parents can be found at — – Bullying: Spotting it, Stopping it poster from Psychologists for Peace – an interest group of the APS.– Conflict resolution posters and Wise Ways to Win story book for families and children from Psychologists for Peace – an interest group of the APS

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