

Aggression: why it happens and what to do about it (ages 3 to 4)

Written for Canada



www.babycenter.ca/preschooler/behaviour/aggression-age-3-to-4/

Why preschoolers get aggressive

There you are, watching your little angel through the window at preschool, thinking how blessed you are to have her. All of a sudden, she draws back her little hand – and whacks another child squarely on the nose.

As shocking as it may be to you, aggression is a normal part of a child's development. Lots of children this age grab toys from classmates, hit, kick or scream themselves blue in the face from time to time. Sometimes the cause is a simple case of fear: your child might lash out if she feels cornered by another child, for instance.

Other triggers may have more to do with frustration. After all, your child is learning a lot of new skills, from using scissors to speaking in complex sentences. She can easily become frustrated with everything she's trying to learn and end up pouncing on a playmate. If she's going to preschool for the first time, she's also getting used to being away from home. If she feels resentful or neglected on top of everything else, she might just retaliate by shoving the child who won't get out of her way.

Sometimes, your little one is simply [tired](#) and [hungry](#). She doesn't quite know what to do about it, so she responds by biting, hitting or throwing a tantrum.

The good news is your child will eventually grow out of her aggressive behaviour as she discovers how to use words instead of fists and feet to solve her problems. The key is helping her realize – sooner rather than later – that she'll get better results from talking than she will from pulling a friend's hair.

What you can do help your child with her aggression

Respond quickly

It's best to let her know instantly when she's done something wrong. Remove her from the situation – for a preschooler, three or four minutes is enough. The idea is for her to connect her behaviour with the consequence and to work out that if she hits or bites, she'll miss out on the fun. No matter how angry you are with her, try not to shout, hit or tell your preschooler she's bad. Rather than getting her to change her behaviour, this simply teaches her that verbal and physical aggression are acceptable when she's angry. Instead, set a good example by controlling your temper and calmly pulling her out of the situation.

Stick to the plan

As much as possible, respond to aggressive behaviour the same way every time. The more predictable you are ("OK, you pushed Amy again – that means another time-out"), the sooner you'll set up a pattern that your child will recognize and expect. Eventually it will sink in that if she misbehaves, she will be taken away from the fun – the first step in controlling her own behaviour.

Talk about it

Let your child calm down, and then discuss what happened. The best time to do this is after she's settled down but before she forgets what happened – ideally, 30 minutes to an hour later. Ask if she can explain what triggered her outburst ("Lauren, why do you think you got so cross with Amy?"). Explain in as few words as possible that it's perfectly natural to get angry sometimes, but it's not OK to push, hit, kick or bite. Suggest better ways of showing how angry she is: by kicking a ball, pounding her fist into a pillow, finding an adult to help, or simply voicing her feelings: "Amy, I feel really angry because you took the purple crayon."

Now is also a good time to teach her to walk away from infuriating situations and people until she can think of a better way to respond than letting her fists fly. You can help your youngster deal with her anger by reading books together on the topic.

Reinforce [responsibility](#)

If your child's aggression damages someone's property or makes a mess, she should help to fix it. She can help to glue a broken toy back together, for instance, or clean up the cookies or blocks she threw in anger. Don't present this as a punishment, but rather the natural consequence of an aggressive act – something that anyone would need to do if he or she broke something.

Also make sure your preschooler understands that she needs to say sorry – even if you have to lead her by the hand to the offended party and say it for her. Her apologies might seem insincere at first, but the lesson will eventually sink in.

Reward good behaviour

Rather than paying attention to your child only when she misbehaves, try to catch her being good – when she asks for a turn at the computer game instead of snatching the mouse away, for instance, or gives up her swing to another child who's been waiting. Tell her how proud of her you are, and be specific in your praise ("You were very kind to let Jack play on the swing first").

Limit TV time

Innocent-looking cartoons and other so-called [children's shows](#) are often rife with shouting, threats and hitting. So try to monitor the programs your preschooler sees by watching them with her – particularly if she's prone to aggression. If something happens on a show that you don't approve of, talk to her about it: "Did you see how that girl pushed her friend to get what she wanted? That wasn't a very good thing to do, was it?" Computer games can also contain aggressive themes, so if she has older siblings, monitor her exposure to their games.

Don't be afraid to seek help

Some kids have more trouble with aggression than others. If your child's behaviour is frequent and severe, interferes with school or other organized activities, and results in physical attacks on children or adults, talk to her doctor. Together you can try to get to the root of the problem and decide if a psychologist or psychiatrist is needed. Sometimes an undiagnosed learning or behaviour disorder is behind the frustration and anger; sometimes the problem is related to family or emotional difficulties. It's very unlikely professional help will be necessary - but if your child does need some help, it'll be a relief to know that you don't have to deal with the problem on your own.

Talk to other parents of small children

Other parents are an excellent source of support and ideas for dealing with an aggressive preschooler. Whether it's offering a sympathetic ear or sharing a successful approach, tap into your parent network the next time you are at a loss of what to do with your aggressive preschooler. You could also post a question to our [BabyCenter Canada community](#).