

Aggressive behaviour in children and youth: When is it something to be concerned about?

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Aggression in young people is an important social issue. Children and youth who behave aggressively may harm not only themselves, but also their families, their communities and society at large.

Research shows us that children with serious aggression problems are more likely than children without such problems to become teenagers who have problems with aggression, other mental health issues or substance use—and as adults they are more likely to engage in acts of violence.

The earlier a young person with an aggression problem is identified and receives help, the greater the chance that the chosen treatment will have lasting benefits.

Aggression is an action or threat of action that is intended to harm another person, either physically or psychologically.

Understanding aggression

There isn't a simple reason to explain why someone behaves aggressively. However, we do know that there are characteristics of children, youth, their families and their environments that can either increase (risk factors) or decrease (protective factors) the likelihood that they will display aggressive behaviour. Some of these are listed below. Working to minimize risk factors and enhance protective factors can help reduce or eliminate aggressive behaviour.

Individual

Risk factors

- difficult temperament
- poor emotional control
- poor social skills
- lower-than-average IQ
- substance use
- certain mental health problems, such as conduct disorder

Protective factors

- optimism
- empathy

- high self-esteem
- strong cultural identity
- higher-than-average IQ

Family

Risk factors

- discipline that is too harsh, too lenient or inconsistent
- lack of appropriate supervision
- having parents who reject them, are cold and unsupportive, use aggression to solve their own problems or don't communicate or work through problems with them
- family instability
- neglect or abuse
- having parents with substance use problems
- having a mother who experiences depression

Protective factors

- firm, fair and consistent discipline
- appropriate level of parental supervision
- comforting by caregivers
- secure attachment to a caregiver (that builds trust, self-esteem, self-control, confidence and ability to develop healthy relationships)
- family stability
- positive parental involvement

Environment

Risk factors

- living in conditions that are economically or socially disadvantaged
- living in an unsafe neighbourhood (e.g., with gangs, drug dealing and other criminal activities)
- being associated with gangs
- attending a poorly run or unsafe school
- teens having friends who behave aggressively
- watching a lot of television

Protective factors

- living in a socially advantaged neighbourhood
- participation in extracurricular activities
- being successful at school
- solid relationship with at least one caring adult (such as a parent, grandparent or teacher)
- feeling a sense of attachment to their community

“Normal” aggression

Children and youth pass through a number of developmental stages in which certain negative behaviours, including those involving some aggression, can be considered commonplace or “normal.”

But no matter how “normal” these behaviours are, they are not socially acceptable, and young people need to be made aware of that.

Types of aggression

Aggression can take many forms. Some types of aggression are listed below:

- poking, pinching, pushing, shoving, spitting, tripping, hitting, kicking, throwing things and beatings
insults and taunts
- hidden activities that are more difficult to detect, such as lying, cheating, stealing and setting fires
- aggressive response to frustration, teasing or threats
- spreading gossip or rumours, manipulating friendships or excluding one person from a group
- sexual acts of any kind performed without the voluntary agreement of the other person
- bullying, which is repeated aggressive behaviour of any kind.

Preventing aggression

The best way to reduce incidents of aggression among children and youth is to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Successfully discouraging aggressive behaviour in young people involves building solid and appropriate relationships with them, and creating a structured and secure environment. The following are a number of tips for preventing aggression:

- **Set out clear expectations.** Let young people know how you expect them to behave.
- **Build rapport and be understanding.** Talk to young people, listen to them and show concern when appropriate.
- **Show cultural sensitivity.** Understand that people who come from other cultural, social or spiritual backgrounds may define aggression differently.
- **Be encouraging.** Offer praise and thanks for positive behaviours.
- **Avoid power struggles.**
- **Manage problems as they arise.** Address small problems before they turn into bigger ones.
- **Become aware of triggers.** Identify the situations or stresses that cause a young person to act out or behave aggressively—and work toward eliminating them or minimizing their impact.
- **Develop strategies to help young people manage their emotions.** Help children and youth develop the skills necessary to manage emotions that can lead to aggressive outbursts.

- **Use positive reinforcement.** Praise and reward positive social behaviours.

Managing aggression

If you interact with children and youth—for example, as a parent, teacher or front-line worker—you'll likely face aggressive behaviour. Some strategies described below can help you diffuse a situation or calm a young person. Other strategies are helpful after the incident, when it is important to find out what brought on the behaviour so you can address the cause.

- **Control your body language and tone of voice.** Make sure your body language and tone of voice do not contradict your verbal message.
- **Stay calm.** Focus on letting the person know that you care about him or her, are concerned about what is happening and are there to help. Don't try to solve the problem or conflict that led to the aggressive behaviour while a young person is acting aggressively toward you.
- **Offer a way out.** Offer a young person a way out of the situation. Give clear choices, with safe limitations. In this way, you allow the young person to retain a feeling of control along with his or her self-esteem.
- **Discourage bystanders.** When a young person is acting out, ask peers who may be watching to leave the setting and continue with their activities.
- **Don't make threats.** Don't give warnings about consequences that you are not prepared to follow through on or that are unreasonably severe.
- **Don't make generalizations.** Saying, "You always do this when . . ." reinforces negative behaviours.
- **Wait for the right moment.** Wait until after an incident involving aggression is over, when everyone has calmed down, to talk to a young person about inappropriate behaviours.
- **Maintain safety.** Make sure that everyone present during an incident involving aggression is safe at all times. If you can't control the situation, call for help.
- **Deal appropriately with threats.** In most cases, children or youth who make threats don't carry them out. Your main goal will be to get a young person making threats to focus on the way he or she is feeling, and to keep them away from any target of aggression. Keep in mind that young people who have behaved aggressively, damaged property, set fires, harmed animals or shown other conduct problems in the past are more likely to carry out a threat.

Note: Get help as quickly as possible if a young person threatens to damage or destroy property; or hurt or kill himself or herself or someone else.

When is aggression a concern?

If you are trying to determine whether or not a young person has a serious problem with aggression, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the behaviour occur regularly (that is, every day, every week or every month)?
- Has the young person been behaving aggressively for a long time?

- Are you concerned about the young person's behaviour for any other reasons besides aggression?
- Does the behaviour persist or appear to be getting worse?
- Does the young person explode at situations that don't bother other young people—or for no obvious reason?
- Is it difficult to calm the young person down after an outburst?
- Has the young person injured himself or herself or anyone else?
- Does the young person's behaviour lead to conflicts with parents, siblings, peers or teachers?
- Do all the young person's friends behave aggressively or anti-socially?

The earlier a young person with an aggression problem is identified and receives help, the greater the chance that the chosen treatment will have lasting benefits.

Getting help

Maybe you suspect that your child or a young person with whom you work or volunteer may have an aggression problem requiring special help. General practitioners (family doctors) are often the first health care providers whom people turn to in this situation. The family doctor might make an assessment, or might make a referral to a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker.

Assessments involve the use of tested methods to understand young people's behaviour with respect to their families, school environments and peer relationships.

There are many early intervention and treatment programs that have been proven to help young people who show signs of aggression and significantly reduce any harmful outcomes. The following are some organizations you could contact for help.

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) — Child, Youth and Family Program: 416 535-8501 ext. 6248 · <http://www.camh.net/>
- Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO): <http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/>
- Parents for Children's Mental Health: <http://www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org/>

The information in this brochure has been adapted from [Acting Out: Understanding and Reducing Aggressive Behaviour in Children and Youth](#) (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2007).

DISCLAIMER: Information on this site is not to be used for diagnosis, treatment or referral services and CAMH does not provide diagnostic, treatment or referral services through the Internet. Individuals should contact their personal physician, and/or their local addiction or mental health agency for further information.

