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## What Parents Can Do Right Now to Reduce Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

*By Edward Christophersen, PhD, ABPP and Susan VanScoyoc, PhD, ABPP*

Aggressive behavior in a child is one of the most concerning issues a parent can face. The consequences of aggression in and outside the home are often detrimental to the child and others including injury, decreased peer interactions, expulsion from child care and school settings, and increased use of physical punishment by parents. In the long term, young children who regularly engage in physical aggression are 3 times more likely to be diagnosed later with a mental health problem than children who do not engage in such behavior.<sup>1</sup> Parents can feel at a loss when trying to figure out why their child is aggressive or how they can change the environment to encourage more appropriate behavior. Understanding the antecedents, or the “Why’s and What Can Be Changed” of aggression, is a useful starting place when helping parents address this important concern. Of course, directly teaching a child more appropriate ways to cope with anger and frustration also is a necessary strategy for fully addressing the problem. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the more immediate, hands-on efforts a parent can make to set the stage for better behavior and more likely success when it comes to teaching those necessary social and coping skills.

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### Why are children aggressive?

Children are often aggressive because they experience and witness aggression in their environment. Perhaps the most influential source of modeling aggression for the child is the parent. Parents who rely on aggression in the form of physical discomfort to manage their child's behavior are far more likely to have aggressive children than parents who use more positive strategies.<sup>2</sup> Parental behavior such as arguing, threatening, yelling, and berating also can be viewed as aggressive and will encourage a child to deal with frustration the very same ways. Verbal aggression in parents, even in the absence of physical aggression, has been linked to aggression in children, as well as delinquency and interpersonal problems from preschool to adolescence.<sup>3</sup> The impact of family arguing and physical violence is long standing, with implications for adult functioning years later.<sup>4</sup> The same social learning

principles can be applied to a child's observation of parental aggression. If a parent responds to personal frustration or interpersonal conflict with inappropriate remarks, slamming the steering wheel, throwing an item across the room, or physical altercation, for example, a child is learning that feelings of frustration and anger are managed using such options. In other words, aggressive behavior begets aggressive behavior.

Many factors in a child's social environment also can impact the expression of aggressive behavior. Some factors such as unresponsive schools, unavailable mental health services, and economic inequality may not be under a parent's control to change. Other factors found to correlate with aggressive behavior such as exposure to violent media, community violence, guns in the home, and association with aggressive peers, however, can be influenced by parental action.<sup>5</sup> Several studies support the relationship between a child's exposure to violent media and increased risk for exhibiting aggressive behaviors.<sup>6,7</sup> Such findings have been noted for preschoolers through adolescents. Similar relationships would be expected between aggressive children and the acceptance of violence in school and community settings. Although many parents may feel like the social factors contributing to their child's aggression are insurmountable, some issues can be addressed by parents and are discussed in the next section.

### What can be changed?

The health care provider can play an important role in educating parents about the antecedents of aggression and in helping parents determine what changes can be made in a child's environment to effectively address the issue. Of course children with severe aggression may require the intervention of a mental health specialist as well to teach parents and children how to manage their aggressive behavior. Even if such a referral is made, parents can leave the office with some ideas on how they can stop contributing to the child's negative behaviors quite immediately. A list of these strategies to share with parents is provided below.

- 1. Avoid spanking.** Many parents of aggressive children often spank or use other forms of physical punishment. As a parent, you might assume your child's aggressive behavior "causes" you to spank when in reality the reverse may be true. Your child sees that you are responding to your anger or frustration with physical behaviors and may then do the same when she is angry or frustrated. Although not every child who is spanked will become aggressive, if your child is aggressive it is best to stop using this discipline option. Talk with your health care provider, child's teacher, or other specialists about options to use for discipline that do not involve being physical with your child.
- 2. Avoid yelling, swearing, and belittling.** Parents who hit are most likely to also yell. In our experience, yelling seems to have replaced spanking – many families who have decided not to spank their children yell at them instead. Such verbal aggression can have the same negative impact on aggressive behavior as spanking. If you would prefer your child to respond to frustration with a calm voice and respectful requests, then you need to model that type of response as well. Many parents find it helpful to figure out ahead of time which situations typically cause them to yell and to develop a proactive plan to respond more positively instead. Be sure to think of calming phrases you can tell yourself such as, "I can handle this without yelling", as well as what phrases you can say to your child in a direct but respectful manner.
- 3. Give your child time to calm down.** Aggressive children seem to thrive on confrontation. They quickly engage in a "battle of the wills" over daily issues and discipline, resulting in an unhealthy escalation of aggression. If your child seems to become even more agitated when you try to help him calm down, you may find less aggression if you simply leave your child alone. For example, if your child is in time-out for hitting and then



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starts to scream or swear, there is no need to spank, yell, or reprimand that behavior. Your child will not learn from your discipline in such an emotional state anyway and ignoring the behaviors may help to reduce them in the long run. Of course you should keep your child safe from harming himself or others. This can be done, however, without bombarding your child with new requests, demands, or punishments. In short, verbal or physical confrontation almost guarantees that the child will not be able to calm down or to learn the message you intended to send with your initial discipline strategy.

4. **Avoid reinforcing aggression.** Many parents unknowingly reinforce their child's aggressive behavior. If your child is allowed to avoid unpleasant tasks such as doing chores or sharing by being aggressive, your child is learning that aggression works. The same concept applies when your child is given something she wants just to stop the aggressive behavior. You may find it useful to pay careful attention to how you and other major caregivers may be unintentionally encouraging your child's aggressive behavior. For example, if you allow a younger, aggressive sibling to have a toy being played with by an older sibling just to end the negative interaction, you are reinforcing aggressive problem-solving in that child. Furthermore, both children are learning that aggression is an effective way to get what you want. Once you are aware of your behaviors and reinforcing responses, you can address aggression more appropriately by removing the aggressive child from the situation, rewarding the older child for not being aggressive in return, or removing the toy if both children have become aggressive.
5. **Reduce roughhousing.** One way that aggressive behavior may be unintentionally reinforced is through rough play. Many children enjoy "roughhousing" with an older sibling or a parent. For many children, such play is contained to that play period and they are able to reconvene with normal activities. There are some children, however, who tend to ramp up their own aggression during and after such interactions and simply cannot calm down when such playtime is over. It is often during these times the child then gets in trouble for being aggressive. For these children, such roughhousing should be eliminated for a period of time. If eliminating all such play results in an improvement in your child's aggressive behavior, then the aggressive interactions should be avoided in the future. More appropriate ways to encourage your child's physical activity include going for walks, riding bikes, playing catch, shooting baskets, or joining organized classes such as karate.
6. **Turn off the TV and video games.** Today's child can be barraged with violence through television, movies, and video games. Even if a child is not directly watching the television, the odds of him or her witnessing a violent episode in prime time has increased significantly over the last decade.<sup>8</sup> The simple strategy of reducing the number of hours your child is exposed to such content can reduce aggression. Such a reduction can be achieved by turning off the television when no one is watching it (and especially during meal time) and to avoid watching violent programming when your child is awake. Furthermore, even child-friendly programming should be viewed sparingly for young children. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time (television, DVD's, and videogames) for children under 2 years of age and no more than 2 hours of screen time per day for children older than 2. They also recommend that children should not have TV or videogame screens in their bedrooms. These strategies can be followed more easily if your child is required to choose ahead of time what show he is going to watch or which videogame he is going to play for his allotted media time. If you are consistent with such an arrangement, you will most likely find that your child adapts quickly to your expectations and does not argue with you for more time in front of the television. If you start such a plan when your child is young, you may not only reduce the chance of aggressive behavior but also will be setting your family up for an easier transition into adolescence when increased media time is a temptation.
7. **Supervise your child's play and playmates.** The way a child is allowed to play with other children also can influence aggressive behavior. Thus, we recommend you supervise your young child's play at all times. In doing so, you cannot only intervene when your child is aggressive but can also protect and support your child regarding the aggression behavior of playmates. Teach your child how to respond to aggression appropriately (eg, tell an adult, move away from the child) and do not allow your child to physically "work it out" with a peer or sibling when they have a disagreement. Although you may not be available to monitor every playmate or even to insure your child can avoid aggressive playmates in other settings, your child can be taught how to avoid becoming a victim of violence. Take time to practice skills such as how to tell an adult about aggression or how to tell an aggressive peer to stop. A proactive approach to teaching children appropriate skills, by actually practicing them not just discussing them, can go a long way toward reassuring a parent that their child knows the skills and can use them. This is just as true in the classroom and playground as it is in the home.



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- 8. Get help.** For parents who suffer from low frustration tolerance and poor anger management some type of therapy might be needed. If you find that even with your best efforts you cannot effectively manage your own aggression against your children or others, including yelling, slamming doors, or other examples of negative coping, please contact your own health care provider for a referral to a specialist in adult mental health issues.

### Conclusion

Parents may feel at a loss when it comes to handling the aggressive behavior of their young child. A supportive health care provider can offer numerous ideas for discouraging aggressive behavior or, preferably, never allowing it to start. The most influential sources that model aggression include the child's parents, media, and peer groups. When dealing with such a troublesome and potentially debilitating behavior such as aggression, parents need to know there are things they can do. Aggression, in children, is often a symptom of the type of environment the child is being raised in. When parents spank and yell at their children, reinforce confrontation and inappropriate problem-solving, and expose them to aggressive media and peers, they often have children who are aggressive. All of these environmental factors can be addressed immediately and effectively by parents with some education and guidance during an office visit.

### Resources for Parents

- Christophersen ER, Mortweet SM. *Parenting that Works: Building Skills that Last a Lifetime*. Washington, DC: APA Books; 2003
- *Raising Children to Resist Violence* (Joint publication of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association). Available at <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resist-violence.aspx>. Accessed February 5, 2010
- Television and internet safe viewing tips and more: [www.parentsTV.org](http://www.parentsTV.org). Accessed March 8, 2010
- *9 Things to Do Instead of Spanking*. Available at: [www.positiveparenting.com/resources/feature\\_article\\_002.html](http://www.positiveparenting.com/resources/feature_article_002.html). Accessed February 5, 2010
- Evidence-based mental health treatments for children and adolescents: <http://www.abct.org/SCCAP/>. Accessed March 8, 2010

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6. Manganello JA, Taylor CA. Television exposure as a Risk Factor for Aggressive Behavior Among 3-year-old children. *Arch of Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2009;163:1037-1045
7. Villani S. Impact of media on children and adolescents: A 10-year review of the research. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2001;40: 392-401
8. Parents Television Council. *Dying to entertain: Violence on prime time broadcast television 1998 to 2006*. Los Angeles, CA: Parents Television Council; 2007

**Author's Note:** This material was adapted from: Christophersen ER, Mortweet SM. *Parenting that Works: Building Skills that Last a Lifetime*. Washington, DC: APA Books; 2003. More information about the topic of discouraging aggression can be found in this publication.

### Biosketches



**Susan M. VanScoyoc** is a faculty member at the University of Phoenix Online, Phoenix AZ. She can be contacted at [svanscoyoc@email.phoenix.edu](mailto:svanscoyoc@email.phoenix.edu)

**Edward R. Christophersen** is a Professor of Pediatrics at the Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics, Kansas City, MO. He can be contacted at [echrist@cmh.edu](mailto:echrist@cmh.edu)