Young children, aggression, bullying and what to do

Very young children often use pushing, shoving or yelling to get what they want. They have not learned yet about sharing, joining in, taking turns, etc. This type of behaviour isn’t bullying.

However, bullying behaviour can start at this age, including targeted verbal and physical aggression, social exclusion, and rumour spreading.

**Promoting positive behaviour and reducing aggression and early bullying is most likely to be effective when children are young.**

Intervening early stops early bullying-like behaviours becoming established patterns of interaction.

**Aggressive behaviour is normal in young children**

Most young children use some form of aggression to get and keep belongings and food they want and to respond to actions of others that upsets them.

Aggressive behaviour tends to peak between 1 to 3 years of age, after which it declines as children start to develop spoken language, emotional and social skills. Children tend to dislike other children who continue to use high levels of physical and verbal aggression after 3 years.

**If you see aggressive behaviour, talk sensitively with the child to see if you can identify and then deal with the reason for the behaviour.** For example, the child might be:

- be upset about something at home, like the death of a pet, and be lashing out at other children
- exploring her potential and power to push others around - a normal thing to explore
- hurt about always being left out by a group of children he wants to play with, and is reacting by damaging their activities.

Help the child understand and deal with their feelings and then work out other ways to behave.

Be alert to two types of aggressive behaviour in children from 4 years of age.
Reactive aggression

Reactive aggression is pushing, yelling or biting in response to someone else's action that is upsetting.

A child of 4 years or older who shows frequent reactive aggression needs your support to avoid over-reacting to events, develop emotional control, and get a sense of control of some things in the world. Over-reactive children are more likely to be targeted in bullying.

You have a critical role to help young children learn how to deal with difficult or frustrating situations. Help children identify and manage their feelings, and show them more appropriate ways to behave. For example, you could say, 'I'd like you to use your words when you are upset'.

Proactive aggression

Proactive aggression is using aggression to get what you want or to dominate others. Proactive aggression can be used by children with good social skills to dominate others and to assert their social power. It can also be used by children with limited social skills and who struggle to make friends.

Proactive aggression can turn into early bullying. Children who bully others view aggression positively as a way to solve problems or get what they want. You have a critical role in stopping aggression becoming an established pattern of behaviour. Teach alternative ways to solve problems and achieve success.

Single events of aggression are different from bullying. In bullying, children use proactive aggression against younger or weaker children in deliberate and repeated attempts to dominate and hurt the other child. Bullying behaviours have been observed in young children from as young as 4 years old.

If you see aggression or bullying

You need to respond if you see aggressive behaviour or bullying in young children.

Try to find out the reason for the behaviour.
Sometimes aggression is an attempt to fit into a new group of children. Aggressive behaviour may also be a response to stress, worry or feeling strong emotions. For example, the stress of starting in a new group at kindergarten, moving house or being worried about a sick family member may lead to anti-social or aggressive behaviour.

Young children who are experiencing significant changes need time and support from adults to help them adjust and build relationships.

The importance of intervening early

Young children who regularly use aggression to sort our problems and get what they want can have ongoing social problems. Children who bully others need help as early as possible.

Physical aggression peaks at about 30 months of age and then decreases. Older children use more indirect verbal aggression and social exclusion. If adults do not intervene, there is a risk that physical aggression may simply shift to indirect aggression.

**Research shows that intervention for reduce aggression and promote positive behaviour is most likely to be effective when children are young.** The most productive time to intervene with inappropriate, aggressive and anti-social behaviour is with children between 3 and 8 years of age.

At this age, children are usually more willing to participate in activities that adults require and are less likely to be a member of a peer group that supports inappropriate behaviour.

Parents and educators can work in partnership to deal with ongoing aggressive behaviour by:

- setting clear expectations for behaviour
- teaching and supporting social and emotional skills
- teaching and acknowledging positive pro-social behaviour
- pointing out and intervening with inappropriate behaviour
- explaining how aggressive behaviour can hurt others and does not solve problems for long
- ensuring adults consistently reinforce positive behaviour and apply consequences for inappropriate behaviour.

Children need a reason, motivation and to know exactly what is expected to 'be good'. Adults need to teach and reward positive behaviours.
A positive approach to positive behaviour

It is highly likely that children will show or experience aggressive behaviour at some time. You can turn these sometimes distressing events into an opportunity to learn about ways to deal with aggression and bullying, a skill for life.

Things to remember:

- emphasise teaching, not punishment
- avoid labelling young children as 'bullies' or 'victims'
- avoid responding to a child's aggression with anger or aggression
- make sure your behaviour does not include anything that young children could interpret as bullying or teasing.

Children benefit from a positive partnership between parents and educators.

Responding to bullying incidents

Bullying can be damaging to everyone involved, including those who observe it happening.

Respond to children if they are bullied by:

- listening calmly with empathy
- reassuring the child you will help
- telling them that although they might feel bad, it is not their fault
- giving some suggestions about what to say if it happens again, for example, 'Don't do that, I don't like it'
- encouraging them to ask for help next time if they need it
- talking to the child about how to deal with strong feelings of anger
- helping the child to think about what they could do to be safe (if appropriate)
- helping all children in the incident to learn to sort things out in more appropriate ways.

Respond to children who bully others by:

- listening calmly with empathy to this child's perspective too
- finding out what the child was thinking about when being aggressive or behaving inappropriately
- pointing out how the other child is feeling
• teaching children the various skills they need to join in and play appropriately with others
• talking to children about how to deal with strong feelings
• teaching children more appropriate ways to deal with conflict or problems, for example, suggest they use words, ask questions, think about the consequences of their behaviour, etc.
• acknowledging steps towards more appropriate behaviour
• ensuring you praise and encourage the child's positive behaviour.

Children who are responding to grief or loss or stress with anger or aggression need your patient and supportive help.

Talking to young children about bullying

When talking to very young children, use a simple description of what has happened like, 'He is being mean to you all the time'.

Avoid the word 'bullying' when talking about and to young children.

Also avoid labelling children as 'bullies' or 'victims' at any age, but particularly at this young age. Labels like these can stick and influence other people's attitudes to the children involved. A negative reputation can be a problem even for young children.

If you do want to talk about 'bullying' to young children, it's important to be clear about what bullying is. You could say something like:

_Bullying is when someone:_

- keeps picking on you again and again and tries to make you feel bad
- says or does lots of mean things that upset you
- makes fun of you a lot
- tries to stop you from joining in or make others not like you
- keeps hurting you such as hitting or punching you.

_Bullying is not fair. You feel like you can't stop it. Bullying is not okay._

_Explain that not all upsetting or inappropriate behaviours are bullying._ You could say something like:_Sometimes you might have a fight or argument with someone. If it only happens once, it is not bullying even though it can be upsetting. It is also not bullying if you sometimes fight with a friend and you can sort it out._
More about educational settings

A partnership between parents and educators is central in dealing with and modifying children's aggressive behaviour.

In educational settings, you can minimise aggression and bullying by:

- focusing on secure and positive relationships within the group
- fostering a positive classroom community
- modelling positive ways to deal with conflict and solve problems
- discussing what bullying is in the class group
- talking regularly about clear rules against bullying
- including learning goals which promote friendships
- providing and practising specific steps for social problem solving skills
- ensuring communication between school and home about the importance of a positive approach to encouraging appropriate behaviour in young children.

Early childhood educators need to investigate what is causing aggressive behaviour and address the underlying reasons as well as the behaviour itself.

Avoid setting up a situation where you comfort a student who is hurt and punish the child doing the bullying. This may backfire by continuing a relationship pattern of bullying.

Students who bully others tend to target children who do not fight back and who do not receive support from peers. Children who are being targeted may benefit from initially having an older 'friend' who plays a protective role while you all work toward the longer term solution to the bullying behaviour as well.

Bullying rarely happens where there is an adult present. Most children know that aggression is against the rules, so students who want to bully others will do so out of sight of adults.

Teach children what to do if they see bullying behaviour.

When young children perceive that others repeatedly break the group rules, the social status 'payoff' the children get from bullying will decrease. Other children are more likely to speak up or report bullying when there are clear group rules and expectations about behaviour in the class.