

FOCUS

On Early Childhood



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Understanding Aggressive Behavior

Forty-three percent (43%) of the cases referred to early childhood mental health consultants last year were for aggressive behavior, and 34% were for problems with self-regulation. This means that more than three-fourths of the children referred have problems controlling their behavior and in more than half of those cases, they are labeled as too aggressive. What's going on and what should we do?

Definition: Aggression can be "forceful action" (more like the more socially acceptable characteristic of assertiveness) or "hostile, injurious or destructive behavior" (the kind of aggression that's not acceptable).

Some causes of inappropriate aggression in young children:

Frustration, being unable to do something the child really wants to do; inability to express feelings (lack of language skills); fear, anger, sadness, feelings of isolation, lack of control

The role of aggression in healthy development: The impulse to be aggressive is part of the human need to survive. In young boys especially, some aggressive behavior—often taking the form of "fantasy play" where they play violent games and try to kill the bad guys—is a way of making sense of the world and releasing pent-up energy. In spite of all our efforts not to stereotype them, studies (not to mention our experience at home and in the classroom) consistently show that on average little boys tend to be more active—and more aggressive—than little girls.

Tips for handling aggression:

- Determine what might have triggered the behavior; redirect the child to something else; don't over-react
- Be clear about what is appropriate and what is not (e.g., it is OK to be angry, but it is not OK to bite)
- Model the behavior you would like to see in the child (e.g., think about what spanking communicates)
- Limit the amount of violent and aggressive behavior children are exposed to on television, in movies and video games
- Provide opportunities for active play and for children to act out their fantasies in ways that don't hurt

Resources:

- "Helping Young Children Channel Their Aggression," by Sally Provence, M.D., Zero to Three: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_temp_aggression
- "Understanding and Raising Boys," PBS Parents: <http://www.pbs.org/parents/raisingboys/>
- Jane Katch, teacher, author and speaker who focuses on children's violent play and aggressive behavior: <http://www.janekatch.com/>