

Dealing with anger and aggression in toddlers and preschool children

Compiled by Helene van Niekerk

What is the difference between anger and aggression? Anger is a strong, emotional reaction to situations like interference, physical restraints, removal of belongings and threats or attacks. Aggression on the other hand is the verbal or physical intention to hurt someone.

Guidelines for dealing with aggression

- When a child hits you or someone else, kneel down, look at him and say: “Do not hit.”
- Acknowledge the child’s feelings of aggression. For example: “I can see that you are angry, but you may not hit.”
- When he is calm, explain why he’s behaviour is unacceptable.
- Help the child to find appropriate ways of to get what he wants without hitting, like talking about what he feels or wants.
- Ensure that the child does not receive any rewards for his aggressive behaviour, for example getting to play with a toy that he was fighting for.
- Teach the victim of the aggression to say: “Do not hit me. You are hurting me.”
- Do not forbid your child to experience and express negative emotions such as anger, rather teach constructive ways of expressing emotions.
- Be a pro social role model and demonstrate non-aggressive solutions to anger and frustration.

Systematically attend to positive behaviour

- When a child is behaving well, move over to the child, kneel down and smile.
- Look into his eyes; give him a pat on the back or a “high five”, or a hug.
- Describe the positive behaviour you just witnessed, using the format, “I noticed...”

Dealing with temper tantrums

Before:

- Talk to the child about what is expected from him before going out in public. State expectations in positive terms, e.g.: “I would like you to walk stay next to the shopping trolley,” and not: “You can not run around in the mall.”
- Talk to you child about changes in his daily routine so that he will know what to expect.
- A tired child is more difficult to handle, therefore make sure that he is feeling rested when you go out.

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During the tantrum

- Ignore the temper tantrum if possible, do not punish or reward it.
- Stay calm and try not to respond in any way. Keep facial expressions neutral.
- Do not shout, your child is possibly feeling out of control and scared and an angry response from you will worsen the situation.
- Do not hit your child.
- Do not give in to his demands.
- Keep the child safe and isolate him from the situation if necessary.
- Embrace your child if the child allows it, or hold him once he has calmed down. Your child may feel frightened and needs to know that you still love him.
- Do not let other people's disapproval influence your behaviour.

After

- Talk to your child about his behaviour, but remember to criticize the behaviour and not the child.
- Explain why his behaviour is unacceptable.
- Show empathy for his feelings of anger or frustration.
- Discuss alternative ways of behaviour.

Sources:

Mukherjji, P. M. 2001. Understanding children's challenging behaviour.

<http://www.loveandlogic.com/articles.html>

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