Taming aggression in children:  
5 crucial strategies for effective parenting

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Aggression in children can take many forms:

Angry tantrums; hitting, kicking, or biting; hot-headed outbursts that destroy property; cool-headed bullying; verbal attacks; attempts to control others through threats or violence.

What sets children off?

In some cases, kids lash out because they’re frustrated by a problem that’s too big for them. They haven’t yet learned how to control their impulses, or work out conflicts in socially acceptable ways.

In other cases, kids may be wrestling with special difficulties -- like stressful life events, emotional regulation problems, attention deficits, autistic symptoms, or hyperactivity.

Yet in all cases -- even where children have been diagnosed with serious conduct disorders -- adults can have a powerful influence.

Aggression doesn’t happen because we’re programmed to respond to the world with hostility. We all have the capacity to behave aggressively. Whether or not we do it depends on how we perceive the world. Aggressive tendencies are shaped by environmental conditions -- the pressures, threats, opportunities, and consequences that children experience. By tweaking these conditions, we can improve behavior and change the course of development.

That doesn’t mean it’s your fault if your child is acting out. Genetic factors put some kids at higher risk for trouble. So do prenatal factors and early life stress. Stress experienced during childhood can reprogram the way your genes function, and these epigenetic changes can passed along to the next generation (Provençal et al 2013). A baby might be born with certain genes "switched off" -- because of stressors his parents encountered when they were growing up.

Kids are also influenced by environmental forces outside the home. Peers, teachers, neighborhoods, media messages, ideologies, and cultural factors all play a role -- and their effects may vary depending on your child’s genes.

But whatever factors put kids at risk, there is nothing inevitable about the outcome. When caregivers get the help they need, they can have a big impact. Randomized, controlled studies show that aggressive kids change trajectory when parents get practical training and moral support (Furlong et al 2013; Piquero et al 209; Shellby and Shaw 2015; Waller et al 2013).

The interventions work, in part, because parents learn specific tactics for handling aggression. But they also work because parents learn to change their outlook.

Struggling with a child’s behavior problems is stressful and demoralizing. It saps your resilience, your sense of optimism, competence, and goodwill. It can redefine the parent-child relationship in a destructive way, and lead you into thinking thoughts that undermine your ability to cope: they fuel conflict and make behavior problems worse.

Replace these toxic mental habits with positive, constructive, problem-solving thoughts, and you can stop bad behavior before it erupts (Dittman et al 2016; Furlong et al 2013; Shellby and Shaw 2014).

So whether children are merely going through the "terrible twos," or struggling with more difficult problems, we should take heart: With the right tools, we can turn things around.

Here are evidence-based tips for handling aggression in children, presented in two parts. The first part concerns adjusting your outlook as a parent. The second part, which I’ll post later, concerns practical tactics for teaching kids to master their negative impulses.
Tips for adjusting your outlook -- and becoming a more confident, effective parent

1. Don't take it personally.

When your child fails to comply with a request, it's easy to feel disrespected. It's easy to feel targeted when your child flies into a rage. But these emotional reactions, however natural, are wrong-headed.

First, kids don't process emotions and information the way adults do (see below). If your child is very young, there’s a lot she doesn’t understand about her own feelings, let alone yours. If your child is older, it’s still likely that your child’s misbehavior reflects impulsivity or incompetence -- not malice.

Second, research suggests that our pessimistic social beliefs -- the tendency to attribute hostile intentions where none exist -- can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. People who assume the worst tend to provoke negative behavior from others. And parents who make hostile attributions can end up creating the very problems they want to solve.

In one study, mothers who made hostile attributions about their toddlers were more likely, three and half years later, to have children with aggressive behavior problems. The link remained significant even after the researchers controlled for pre-existing child difficulties, as well as the negative parenting behavior that tends to go accompany hostile attributions (Healy et al 2015). Reminding yourself not to take it personally isn't just good for your mood. It's good for your relationship, and good for your child's long-term development.

2. Get realistic expectations about your child’s ability to follow rules and comply with requests.

Young children have shorter attention spans, and they are easily distracted. They take more time to process verbal instructions. Their working memory capacities -- the sheer number of things they can keep in mind at any given moment -- are more limited. Learning new information, and adapting to a change of rules or procedure, may take longer than you realize (Lee et al 2015). Young children require more practice than older kids do, and older kids need more practice than adults (Yim et al 2013).

So when we issue directions, we shouldn't expect young children to respond quickly and efficiently. They work a slower speed, and it's harder for them to transition from one activity to the next. They need us to provide them with clear, simple directions, and then give them the extra time they need to switch gears.

Older children can handle more complexity and speed, but their attention spans, working memory capacities, impulse control, and task-switching skills are still developing. By tuning into your child's pace and abilities -- and providing patient, calm reminders -- you reshape the task into one he’s got the equipment to solve. And your child will get to experience the social and emotional rewards for cooperating -- a crucial experience for his long-term development. You invest more time, but it's an investment that will pay off.

3. Get realistic expectations about the development of empathy and kindness.

Throughout childhood, kids are still learning about emotions -- how to regulate their own moods and read the minds of others. Dependent, inexperienced, and vulnerable, young children are more easily threatened, and thus more likely focus on protecting their own interests (Li et al 2013). Older kids, too, may respond this way if they perceive the world to be hostile or unjust.

And some kids are at a physiological disadvantage. They have the ability to learn about social signals, but their brains don’t reward them as much for doing so (Davies et al 2011; Sepeta et al 2012). As a consequence, kids are less likely to learn on their own. They need our help.

So while your child's behavior might look selfish, that doesn't mean she's incorrigibly self-absorbed. Children demonstrate a capacity for empathy and kindness from a very early age. When they fail to show concern for others, it's often because they perceive the situation differently, or don't know how to control their impulses. They need
opportunities to learn -- by developing secure relationships with us; talking about their feelings and the emotional signals of others; and observing positive role models, and growing up in an environment that rewards self-control and cooperation.

4. Focus on maintaining a positive relationship.

Researchers see families fall into a common trap:

When kids misbehave frequently, parents tend to focus on all those daily conflicts. They feel obliged to answer every offense with criticism or punishment, and end up with a relationship that's mostly characterized by negative exchanges.

It's a grim outcome, and it's also counter-productive. Studies suggest that kids are more likely to learn desirable social skills when we provide them with positive feedback for making good choices -- not threats and punishments for doing the wrong thing. Moreover, a diet of negativity can make kids become more defiant. Negative parenting can lead to a downward spiral of misbehavior, punishment, retaliation, more punishment, and more misbehavior (Cavell et al 2013).

How do you stay calm and upbeat? It isn't easy, not if your child seems stuck in "defiance mode." You'll need social support, and maybe some professional advice. But the first step is reorganizing your priorities (Cavell et al 2013). Maintaining positive relations is more important than prosecuting every failure. Sometimes you need to choose your battles. For more information, see my upcoming tips for handling aggressive or defiant kids.

5. Don't sacrifice your own psychological well-being.

Dealing with behavior problems is very stressful, and stress hurts. It makes us ill, clouds our thinking, and damages relationships. It's contagious -- even young infants pick up on our negative moods. And when parents are stressed out, it adds fuel to the fire: Their children's behavior problems tend to get worse.

So addressing your own well-being shouldn't be an after-thought, a luxury to be put off until your child's behavior problems improve. It's a pressing issue, a central player in the crisis. For help, see these tips for coping with parenting stress, and don't hesitate to seek professional advice from a therapist trained to handle aggressive behavior in children.

More information

For more information about handling aggression and other disruptive behavior, see these evidence-based tips. In addition, see these articles for improving behavior:

References: Aggression in children


See more at: http://www.parentingscience.com/aggression-in-children.html#sthash.jsWk2Qcf.dpuf
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