Chapter 12
Handling Children’s Aggressive Behavior

WHAT AGGRESSION IS

- Aggression is antisocial behavior that results in physical or emotional injury to a person or animal, or that damage or destroys property. It can be either verbal or physical.

Types of Aggression:

Accidental aggression
- Without thinking, children hurt others in the process of their play.

Expressive Aggression
- Expressive aggression is a pleasurable sensory experience for the aggressor.
- It occurs when a child derives enjoyment from a physical action that inadvertently hurts someone or interferes with their rights.
- Expressive aggression is marked by the absence of angry, frustrated, or hostile emotions. It is a playful or exploratory act that causes unintentional unhappiness in someone else.

Instrumental Aggression
- Instrumental aggression results when children engage in physical disputes over objects, territory, or rights and someone is hurt in the process.
- Lack of premeditation and lack of deliberate intent to do harm are the two factors that distinguish instrumental aggression from more purposeful attempts to hurt people or reduce their self-esteem.

Hostile Aggression
- Children who display hostile aggression experience satisfaction based solely on someone else’s physical or psychological pain.
- Their hurtful actions or words are purposeful attacks that serve as retaliation for prior insults or injuries or as a way to get a victim to do what they want.
  1. *Overt aggression*- harm to others through physical injury or the threat of such injury.
  2. *Relational aggression*- damage to another person’s status or self-esteem, through gossip, lies, or other forms of social manipulation.

Assertiveness Versus Aggression
- A socially acceptable alternative to aggression is assertiveness.
- Children display assertiveness when they engage in purposeful actions to express themselves or protect their rights while respecting the rights and feelings of others.
- Assertiveness is related to children’s emerging sense of autonomy.

WHY CHILDREN ARE AGGRESSIVE

Biology
- Some scientists believe that aggression is an instinctive component of human nature.
- Temperament may also play a role in children’s aggressive tendencies.

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis
- Frustration does not guarantee an aggressive response.

The Distorted-Perception Hypothesis
- Aggression sometimes results when children misinterpret neutral social interactions as hostile ones.

Direct Instruction
- In many cases, adults actually tell children to use aggression to resolve a problem situation. For example, Hit him back or Don’t be a sissy.
Reinforcement
- There is convincing evidence that reinforcement plays a key role in shaping and maintaining aggressive behavior in children.
- Success in one situation promotes the aggressor to repeat the behavior toward the same victim in the future.

Modeling
- Another explanation for why children behave aggressively is that they learn how to be aggressive.
- Children experience aggression directly when they are smacked, pulled along, or shoved as punishments for misbehavior.

Lack of Knowledge and Skills
- Children sometimes resort to aggression because they don’t what else to do when their goals are blocked or when they come under attack be another child.
- Children who have few opportunities to practice nonviolent strategies or to learn the skills associated with assertiveness are most likely to be aggressive.

The Emergence of Aggression
- The causes of aggression are varied and complex and the particular form in which aggression is manifested also depends on differing personal variables such as maturity, experience, and gender.

Maturity and Experience
- How children express aggression changes with their cognitive maturation and experience. Most aggression exhibited by children aged two through six is instrumental.

Changes in Aggression over time
- Younger children often resort to physical force to get their way. Older children rely more on verbal tactics.
- Younger children most often engage in instrumental aggression. Hostile aggression becomes more common in later childhood.

Aggression during early childhood
Toddlers and preschoolers are impulsive. Preschoolers’ arguments are often highly emotional, but their less developed memory skills keep them from holding a grudge.

Gender Differences in Aggression
- For infants and toddlers, there appear to be very little gender differences in aggressive behaviors.
- Beyond age two, studies show that males are more overtly aggressive than females.
- Some researchers suggest that the male’s greater concentration of androgen and testosterone, as well as his greater physical strength and more vigorous motor impulses, are the biological reasons for this difference.
- Aggressive behavior is more approved and reinforced for boys than it is for girls.
- When little boys hit, adults say “Boys will be boys”; when little girls hit, they are scolded for acting inappropriately.

Ineffective Strategies Adults Try to Reduce Children’s Aggressive Behavior

Physical Punishment
- A wealth of evidence shows that physical punishment actually increases, rather than limits, children’s use of aggression.
• When adults rely on spanking, slapping, shoving, pinching, shaking, or pulling children roughly, they stand out as aggressive models for youngsters to imitate.
• Children who are subjected to physical punishment for their aggression see aggressive solutions to problems, not non-aggressive ones.
• A third negative outcome of physical punishment is that children view it as a form of retaliation.
• When children are punished physically, they focus primarily on their own discomfort, not on the impact their misbehavior may have had on another person.

**Corporal Punishment in the United States**

- Physical punishment has been banned in prisons, in the military, and in mental hospitals, but it is still practiced in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout this country.
- The majority of reported incidents involve children in the elementary grades, children with learning and mental disabilities, children of color, children from low-income families, and youngsters of small physical stature attending, middle school.
- Corporal punishment in schools and child care centers yields negative outcomes.
- There is strong evidence that children subject to institutionalized corporal punishment become more aggressive, coercive, and destructive over time. (see statistics on page 418)

**Ignoring Aggression**

- Sometimes, adults ignore children’s aggressive acts in the hope that these behaviors eventually will go away. This is a mistake.
- In this way, unchecked aggression in a group setting not only perpetuates itself, but escalates.

**Displacement**

- There are those who think that the way to deal with children who are angry and aggressive is to have them displace their emotions from the original source of anger to some unrelated target.
- Children who are taught that displacement is the ultimate means of handling angry feelings continue to believe that aggression is an effective response to problems.
- Children do not learn how to deal with the real source of their emotions and fail to develop strategies for confronting problems constructively or for preventing problems in the future.

**Inconsistency**

- A fourth ineffective means of dealing with children’s aggressive behavior is to be inconsistent.
- “Coming down hard” on one child while avoiding confrontation with another, or sticking with the rules today and ignoring them tomorrow, leads to confusion and frustration for children.

**Effective Strategies Adults Use To Reduce Children’s Aggressive Behavior**

- Strategies found to be effective in decreasing children’s aggression are those that teach children how to exert their will non-aggressively as well as how to respond assertively to the aggression of others.

**Modeling**

- There are two ways adults can influence what behaviors children imitate. First, they can model nonaggression through their own behavior.
• Adults can screen out some of the aggressive models and materials to which children are exposed.

Reinforcement
• Acknowledge children’s efforts with positive personal messages or other forms of effective praise.
• Other way children find such behavior rewarding is when it helps them to successfully reach their goals.

Direct Instruction
• Reducing the frustration in children’s lives
  1. Appropriate structuring of the physical environment.
  2. Routines that eliminate excessive waiting and sitting lessen frustration too.
  3. Keep rules to a minimum.
  4. Cooperation is emphasized over competition.
  5. Provide sufficient support during free-choice times or in activity areas where aggression is liable to occur.
• Helping children feel more competent
  1. Children who feel they have some control over their lives are less likely to resort to aggression as a way to establish power.
• Fostering empathy among children
• Teaching children prosocial behaviors
  1. When adults actively teach children these behaviors, aggression diminishes.
• Helping children recognize instances of accidental aggression
  1. Providing accurate information changes the child’s view of the purposefulness of the act and reduces the necessity for retaliation.
• Re-channeling children’s expressive aggression.
• Helping children de-escalate potentially aggressive play.
  1. Making it clear that aggression is unacceptable
• Teaching children alternatives to gun play
• Teaching children to generate potential responses to the aggression of others
• Teaching alternatives to aggression through planned activities
• Teaching alternatives to aggression through conflict mediation
• Conflict Mediation – involves walking children through a series of steps beginning with problem identification and ending with a mutually satisfactory solution.

A Model For Conflict Mediation
Step One: Initiating the Mediation Process- Establish the mediator role and neutralize object, territory, or right.
Step Two: Clarifying Each Child’s Perspective-Clarify conflict based on each child’s perspective.
Step Three: Summing Up-Define dispute in mutual terms; make clear each child has responsibility for both the problem and its solution.
Step Four: Generating Alternatives-Ask for suggestions from the children involved and from bystanders.
Step Five: Agreeing on a Solution-Help children create a plan of action that is mutually satisfying.
Step Six: Reinforcing the Problem-Solving Process-Praise children for developing a mutually agreed on solution and for working hard to achieve it.
Step Seven: Following Through-Help children carry out the terms of the agreement.

Chapter 12
Handling Children’s Aggressive Behavior
WHEN AGGRESSION BECOMES HOSTILE

Victims of Bullying
- It has been estimated that 80 percent of children in an elementary school classroom fall victim to bullying. Most likely victims are children least able to respond effectively to taunts and physical assaults.
- Low self-esteem is another distinctive characteristic of chronically victimized children. Most are passive victims.
- Generally, chronic victims of bullying tend to be disliked and elicit little sympathy from peers who observe their predicament.
- It is no surprise, then, that victims of bullying experience a severely diminished sense of competence and worth. They may express their discomfort through lack of appetite, disturbed sleep, real or imagined illnesses, or unusually aggressive behavior toward others.

Bullies
- Bullies are generally fearful, confused, and insecure. Bullies also value aggression. They expect it to get them what they want and feel justified using hostile acts to assert their will.
- Some bullies are youngsters who have experienced few boundaries.
- They believe their hostile outbursts are justified as a means of maintaining their rights.
- Children for whom bullying becomes a standard mode of conduct are four times more likely as adults to be involved in violent crime, be imprisoned, be involved in domestic violence, abuse their children, and be unable to hold down a job.

Witnesses
- Witnesses are affected by hostile aggression, even when they are not directly involved. Witnesses see bullying modeled and reinforced.
- Witnesses may develop feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, or anger by what they see. Witnesses can influence what happens when bullying takes place as supporters of the bully or the victim.

The Role of Adults in Relation to Bully Prevention

Working with victims
- Children are less likely to be victimized if they possess verbal assertiveness skills with which to establish their desires and protect their rights. All children need support in developing the skills especially those children who lack general language proficiency and social skills.

Dealing with bullies
- Bullies cannot simply be shunned or ignored by adults in formal group settings.
- Clear boundaries and consistent expectations are clear ingredients.
- Children must be told their behavior will not be tolerated.

Program-wide solutions are available and some examples of when bullying is most likely to occur include:
1. Children are left unsupervised
2. Unclear expectations or inconsistencies
3. Autocratic or permissive discipline styles
4. Ignore bullying behavior
5. No measures to prevent or address bullying
6. Children lack knowledge and skills to be bully free
7. Poor communication between home and school
PITFALLS TO AVOID

Failing to lay the groundwork
Ignoring developmental considerations
Denying children’s legitimate claims
Affixing blame
Taking sides
Denying a child’s perspective
Masterminding
Ignoring ripple effects
Activity 12.5

Handling Children’s Aggressive Behavior

Directions:
In each of the following circumstances, children are exhibiting aggressive behavior. Please indicate what strategies you would use to control these negative actions.

1. Carla and Raul both want the rolling pin. They begin grabbing and shoving in order to establish who will get it.

2. Several boys have built a fort out of large blocks. They verbally taunt the girls, making it clear that no girls are allowed to enter the area. The girls become upset because they want to build, too. Both sides begin to pretend to shoot one another as they hurl insults back and forth.

3. Tanya brings a realistic looking toy pistol to the center and wants to play with it during the free-choice period.

4. You walk into the cafeteria just in time to overhear John, eleven, threaten two kindergarteners. He says, “If you don’t each give me your cookie, I’ll punch your lights out.”

5. All of the children know that Lydia stammers when she becomes nervous. As she walks toward the front of the room, Marcella taunts in a stage whisper, “Look at the hair on her legs. She’s like a gorilla. Gorilla legs, gorilla legs!” She waits expectantly for the inevitable outcome.