

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Aggression

Question: My child can be sweet one minute and the next minute is threatening physical harm. He gets so angry and lashes out at friends and family members. How can I help him deal with his aggressive tendencies?

Learning to manage our emotions takes time and practice. There are several things you can do to help your son by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

1

Talk about feelings and thoughts—beginning with YOURS.

Begin with prevention. Studies, including those by Larry Aber of New York University, have found that children who understand their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others are less likely to get into conflicts.

You can help your son be less aggressive when you help him understand the perspectives of others beginning with simple statements about what you are feeling and why:

- "I feel happy today because it is such a beautiful day."
- "I feel so tired from work today."

In doing so, it is important not to blame your child for how you are feeling.

2

Help your child express and understand HIS OWN thoughts and feelings.

Try to translate or label what you think your child is thinking or feeling:

- "Your grumpy face makes me think you are feeling fussy."
- As your child grows up, ask questions that help him or her identify feelings, especially aggressive ones: "You seem upset. How are you feeling?"

3

Try to anticipate problems and get involved early.

When your child is being aggressive, teach your child other ways to manage. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises not to allow your child to hit, bite or use other violent behavior.

If you see a situation about to blow up, do something as soon as you can. You can say:

- "I can see that you are about to get upset at the restaurant. We are going to take a walk outside until you can calm down and can manage."

When you can prevent aggression, you are teaching your son how to recognize warning signs and begin to control his own behavior.

4

Stop aggressive behavior.

- "I am going to help you use safe ways of telling us how you feel."
- "I am not going to let you hit someone."

5

Provide other non-hurtful strategies for expressing aggression.

If your child is being hurtful, give your child different ways to express anger. You can ask:

- "What can you do to express your feelings without hurting someone?"

6

Help your child begin to come up with his own solutions to handle conflict.

Studies find that teaching problem solving is effective in combination with helping children learn about feelings and how they can be expressed.

Once your child is calm, you can say:

- "What ideas do you have for handling this situation? I will write down your ideas, and we will try them next time you are feeling angry."

When you encourage your child to think of new ways to handle anger, you are helping your child learn to take responsibility for handling conflicts.

7

Share your own strategies.

For example:

- "I get angry, too. When I am angry, I need time to myself to calm down. I take deep breaths and close my eyes."

When you share your own strategies, your son is learning things from you that he may not have noticed without your sharing them.

8

Help your child understand how others feel and respond when he is aggressive.

Studies by Martin Hoffman of New York University examined the concept of discipline techniques and found that "other-oriented discipline" is most effective. This means that you make your son aware of the impact of his behavior on others.

For example, you can say:

- "When you hurt someone, that person gets angry and wants to hurt you back."

9

Pretend with your child.

Pretending is an important way children learn to take the perspectives of others. You can ask questions to help your son pretend or you can re-enact a time when there was a conflict and ask your child to think of other ways to deal with this situation.

10

See discipline as teaching.

Hoffman found that children were more likely to listen to others and be more considerate if parents weren't harsh or didn't use physical force. When you need to say no to stop a child from misbehaving or set a consequence, do so as firmly, but as non-aggressively, as you can. Think of this as teaching a skill rather than managing difficult behavior.