

## **Coping with Aggression and Teaching Self-Control in the Early Years**

While babies sometimes do things that *appear and feel* aggressive (like grab our hair), they do not yet have the thinking skills to act hurtfully on purpose. So if your 6-month-old bites you on the arm or your 12-month-old takes a whack at you, it is not because they are trying to “get you”. They are not yet able to control their feelings or use words to communicate their thoughts. Over time, they learn right from wrong when you are clear and consistent with rules. Starting at about 18 months, toddlers are learning that they are separate from their parents, and are eager to act as independently as they can. But they have limited self-control and have not yet learned to wait, share, and take turns. And while they are learning more words every day, they still rely heavily on their actions to communicate. When they are angry, frustrated, tired or overwhelmed, they may hit, push, slap, grab, kick, or bite to tell you, *I’m mad! Or, I’m exhausted! Or, I’m over my limit and need a break.*

### **Think About It:**

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you apply the information below to your own child and family.

- What kinds of situations usually lead to your child acting aggressively? Why do you think this is?
- When your child acts in ways that seem aggressive, how do you typically react? Do you think this reaction is helpful to your child or not? Why?

### **What You Can Do:**

Read below about ways to help your young child begin to develop self-control and rely less on aggressive behaviors to communicate needs and feelings.

### **For babies aged birth to 12 months:**

**Set the limit in a clear, firm voice** (without anger).

Then, **redirect** your baby’s attention. If she’s pulling on your hair, hold out a toy instead. If she is playing with the TV remote, offer her a toy with buttons to push.

### **For toddlers 12 months and up:**

When toddlers are aggressive, it usually means they are out of control and need help to calm down before any learning can take place. The following strategies can help you help your child learn to manage her feelings and develop self-control:

**Stay calm.** The calmer you are, the more quickly your child will calm down.

**Recognize your child's feeling or goal.** Let your child know that you understand what he wants to do: *You want to stay longer at the playground, and are mad we have to leave. It's okay to be mad, but it is not okay to hit mommy. Hitting hurts.*

**Use gestures along with your words to communicate with your toddler.** Use a calm, firm (not angry) voice. At the same time, use a "stop" or "no-no" gesture. You might say:

*"No hitting, hitting hurts,"* as you take his hand and hold it by his side, firmly but not angrily.

**Offer alternatives.** Give your child acceptable ways to reach his goal. Instead of throwing balls in the house, offer your child a soft sponge ball to toss inside, or take him outside for "pitching" practice.

**Try a distraction.** Ignore your child's tantrum and instead, do something she doesn't expect: point to a bird outside, start to read a book she loves, or pick up an interesting toy and start to play with it. The bottom line is that young children want attention, and lots of it. When you ignore the tantrum, they tend to give it up much more quickly and accept one of the activities you are offering.

**Suggest ways to manage strong emotions.** When your child is really angry, suggest that he jump up and down, kick a ball, rip paper, cuddle with a teddy bear or use some other strategy *that you feel is appropriate*. This teaches your child to express strong feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways.

**Help your child take a break.** Some children calm more quickly when they can be by themselves in a safe, quiet place. This is not punishment. It helps children learn to soothe themselves and regain control. When your child pulls herself together, tell her what a good job she did calming herself down.