



Aggression in children and young people

Aggressive behaviour begins early in life, and in most children reaches a peak around four years of age, declining after that.

Often it isn't until a child starts school that aggressive behaviour becomes apparent. This is because aggressive behaviour is often explained away as age related behaviour, for example 'the terrible twos'; gender, for example, 'boys will be boys' or a phase, for example, 'she'll grow out of it'.

There is mounting evidence suggesting that a substantial proportion of aggressive, defiant, overactive toddlers and preschoolers continue to have problems at school age.

Most, but not all, serious aggression during adolescence and adulthood is committed by young people who have been persistently aggressive since childhood (Loeber & Hay, 1997).

What is aggressive behaviour?

- Aggression is often used as a term to describe a variety of behaviours, including verbal aggression, bullying, physical fighting, robbery, rape and homicide.
- Relational aggression such as, alienation, ostracism, character defamation and gossip, are also forms of aggressive behaviour.
- Both boys and girls report high level of physical aggression with their siblings, so it is not necessarily a reliable indicator of problem aggressive behaviour.

Why do children become aggressive?

Child temperament and parenting

Research shows that infants with difficult temperaments often attract harsher parenting, and mothers of these children become more coercive than other mothers by the time their children are two years old.

This establishes a 'vicious cycle' as children with difficult temperaments are often more affected by these harsher and more coercive parenting styles.

The combination of difficult temperament and poor parenting predicts aggressive behaviour by the time the child starts school.

Genetic factors

Genetic factors can contribute towards aggressive behaviour, however *genetic factors do not determine aggressive behaviour in children*. Research shows that environmental factors and genetic factors are of roughly equal importance (Plomin & Rutter, 1998; Rutter & Plomin, 1997).

Research indicates that a number of traits associated with aggressive and anti social behaviour are moderate to highly heritable (Lahey, Waldman & McBurnett, 1999). However genetic makeup on its own isn't enough to determine behaviour, environmental factors have a strong role to play in outcomes for these children.

Family factors

High levels of aggression, even in toddlers are found in abused children.

Children from homes where domestic violence is occurring are also more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour.

This is because children living with violence have been 'primed to be reactive'. As they grow up this may be a protective mechanism for these children, although if they are too hyper 'reactive' they may be aggressive in readiness to defend themselves and become unpopular with classmates.

Higher levels of parental supervision during childhood have been found to predict less antisocial behaviour during adolescence. Poor supervision plays a stronger role in late childhood and adolescence than in early childhood.

Peers

Peers may influence each other to engage in anti-social behaviour. However aggression often starts because of rejection from peers, partly as a function of the poor social skills that accompany their aggression.

If you want children to develop behaviour that is responsible and respectful to others, it's crucial that you demonstrate these qualities to your children.

Protective factors

Enhance toddlers' language skills

Toddlers with good communication skills socialise more easily and are less frustrating to their parents. Toddlers are also happier if they can make themselves and their needs understood.

Learning how to delay gratification and being able to communicate needs to an adult or care giver may be the most important protective factors for chronic aggression and anti-social behaviour in toddlers.

Child care

Studies in the US have shown that high quality child care enhances the development of children. Where the quality of care was high, there were fewer reports of behaviour problems than where it was low (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

Social skills for adolescents

Research suggests that placing greater emphasis on social skills can reduce the incidence of adolescent behaviour problems (Peters & Willms, 2002). For example, fostering skills in forming and maintaining relationships, dealing with conflict and understanding their own feelings and behaviours.

Gender

From about four years of age onwards boys are more likely than girls to engage in both aggressive and non-aggressive anti social behaviour.

Aggression in girls is often overlooked because it takes a different form to that of boys. Girls are more likely to use verbal and indirect aggression such as, alienation, ostracism, character defamation and gossip.

One study found the same rate of bullying by school age girls as boys, although girls were less likely to admit to bullying (Pepler & Craig, 1995).

Both boys and girls report fairly high level of aggression with their siblings, so this is not reliable indicator of aggressive behaviour.



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A positive discipline style is associated with lower levels of aggression in children

Tips for a more positive approach to discipline

Effective discipline aims to give children the guidance they need to grow up and develop healthy behaviours, self confidence, respect and a sense of right and wrong.

Build your child's self esteem

Help your child to identify their strengths and appreciate the things they do well. A child who feels respected and worthwhile is less likely to misbehave and will enjoy better relationships with others.

Acknowledge good behaviour

Catch your children being good! Get them to reflect on their behaviour and how it affects the people around them. This helps them to understand the importance of their actions and to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Be clear and consistent

Negotiate rules that all family members contribute to and agree on.

Decide on a discipline plan ahead of time, and:

- make sure that your child understands what the rule is
- explain why the rule is important, and
- be clear about the consequences of breaking the rule.

If you set rules, follow them. Be fair and consistent – children lose respect and trust if they think discipline is random, unfair or punitive.

Handle conflict calmly

It's natural for children and young people to test the limits at different times and see how you respond. Having a negotiated discipline plan in place can help take the heat out of a trying situation.

Teach by example

Children and young people model what they see. If you want children to develop behaviour that is responsible and respectful to others, it's crucial that you demonstrate these qualities to your children. If they make a mistake, don't jump in with criticism – give them the support and help they need to do things differently.

Show you care

How you respond to your child's behaviour lies at the centre of a positive approach to discipline.

- Try not to be so strict that your child can't feel your love and good intentions
- If you discipline your child talk with them afterwards about how they feel and what they learnt
- Share fun times together and enjoy each other
- Try to keep your sense of humour.

Some discipline is not OK

Hitting, punching or severely striking a child is never acceptable. In NSW it is against the law to use excessive physical punishment against a child. This law applies to parents and people acting in place of a parent.

The law says that it is unacceptable to use physical force on:

- any part of your child's head or neck, and
- any other part of your child's body if the harm it causes lasts for more than a short time.

Further reading

- *The Development of Aggressive Behaviour in Children and Young People: Implications for Social Policy, Service Provision, and Further Research* – A discussion paper is available at: www.parenting.nsw.gov.au

For other parenting tips, visit www.parenting.nsw.gov.au.