



Why do Toddlers Hit? Is it genes or environment?

by Judy Arnall, BA, CCFE, DTM

It's natural for toddlers to hit, but where does this aggression come from? Actually, it is in our genes. We evolved from humans who could fight and defend their lives, territory and loved ones, and they passed on the ability to survive through aggression, to the next generation. Even newborns feel anger when they need something. In addition, in the later half of the first year, they demonstrate what is called exploratory aggression - curiosity pushes them to see what reaction hitting or pushing another animal or child will bring. By toddlerhood, ages one to four years, aggression is at its peak, where one out of every four interactions between a child and someone else is physical. This is almost every hour!

Does nurture or nature affect the amount of aggression a child has? Let's pretend that a human is like a car. Aggression is like the acceleration a car can do. We all feel aggression. Self-control is like the brakes. We all have braking ability too, but in varying amounts. Some people have more acceleration and some people have more braking power.

Aggression is a function of the brain. The limbic system is the emotional part of the brain and if we have low serotonin in the limbic system, we have more aggressive behaviors. The frontal lobes are shaped by inborn temperament, but the environment (a parent that says, "No! We don't hit people!") coupled with brain development is responsible for suppression of the physical urge of hitting, pushing and biting.

By age five, children learn about indirect aggression, as the result of their higher order thinking skills. They can be sneakily aggressive in order to ensure they don't get caught, or immediately hit back impulsively. This is a sign of brain development as it takes higher order thinking skills to weigh out the consequences in each act. By age five, children do choose how to express anger.

Hitting relieves tension and may be the reason why parents spank when they are angry. In a small way, it feels satisfying for a second. However, we also realize that we are social groups and we can't be aggressive toward each other and still get along enough to live together. If we hit, we are group sanctioned; by isolation, in the form of time-out when we are young, to social ostracism during the school-age years, and finally, jail, as adults. Isolation is a big punishment for social mammals whether humans or animals. Societal disapproval helps children to suppress their acceleration. Young children are ego-centric and don't care what others think about them yet. Their impulses rule their bodies and their brains. By school-age, children are being exposed to the wider world and care about what people think, so social isolation has a broader impact on their self-control. Pride, shame, and embarrassment are effective social tools to keep mammals aggression in check.

As the brain grows, children learn to cope with emotions and develop more self control. By school age, most children have stopped hitting their friends and playmates, although the odd lapse against siblings is common until the teen years. It's healthy to feel feelings, and express them in better ways such as words that don't hurt anyone. The key is to keep repeating what you want them to do until they begin to take it on themselves. The more children practice calm down tools, the more they are stored in their memory and come to mind as they internalize social and group rules. When children are exposed to all ages of social groups, in extended families and all-age schools, they learn the rules of controlling aggressive behaviour.

Play fighting does not encourage aggression. In fact, it is useful for development. Children discover their own limits, and what other people consider acceptable, and it helps teach self-control. It's hard to watch as a parent, because you know one child is going to come to you crying, but it definitely teaches both children about limits for later.

What is the role of adults: Adults just need to do two things.

Do hold their hands and say "Stop. No. Can you see this hurts your sister?" "Let's do this (stomp our feet on the floor) to express our anger." Children get to see their effect on others and can choose a non-violent way to express their feelings. Keep repeating this message after every aggressive event.

Don't role model hitting, slapping, spanking or any other aggressive behaviours. Children learn by modeling. Children who are hit, are more likely to hit others by thinking that those who have power use physical aggression to wield it.

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