



TODDLER AGGRESSION: HOW TO HANDLE YOUR CHILD'S HITTING, PUSHING, AND BITING

By Judy Arnall

You are having a pleasant coffee and a chat with your best friends, when suddenly your toddler whacks your friend's toddler with a toy truck. There is wailing from the startled child, and a stunned, embarrassed silence from the parents. All eyes are on you as to what you are going to do! What can you do that is respectful, immediate, and teaches your child proper behaviour?

First, recognize that whining, hitting, pushing and biting are pretty normal behaviours of most children from the ages of one to four years. They are trying to get their needs met, whether for attention, personal boundary space, or that super interesting toy they've been eyeing. The problem is that their verbal skills are still very limited and they resort to body language to say A) how they feel, and B) what they need/want. Our role as parents is to discourage their unsociable methods and encourage the polite methods to get what they want. That means, we have to "give them the words" to use and repeat it often!

Of course, your first order of business is to apply first aid and comfort to the injured child. Then you need to address the attacker. Here are some ideas of what to say and do:

- Find the attacker's need: do they want the toy, more personal space, attention, a reaction, revenge, or perhaps more choices? Ask them. Tell them how to ask for what they want. Use simple words.
- Make eye contact.
- Say "Ouch! Hitting/biting/pushing hurts!" or "I don't like that!"
- Don't expect sharing until age three.
- Restrain your child in your lap or carry away to another space to calm down.
- Rocking your child, or rubbing their backs and using a soft, repetitive voice helps your child to calm down also.
- Show disapproval in body/facial language and your voice tone.
- Save your loud and sharp "No!" for times like this and for safety, or emergency situations.
- Have a lot of similar toys and space to re-direct your child to.
- Active Listen: "You're frustrated that he grabbed the toy? You want your toy back?" "We can't hit, but we can ask to have the toy back."

- Teach your child to put up his hand to ward off space invaders.
- Teach I-Messages: “I don’t like that”. “I want the toy.” “I’m not done.”
- Allow your child his own time to give up a toy. Gently remind him that someone is waiting, but don’t force him to give it up.
- Instead of always saying, “Hurry-Up”, you could try, “Take the time you need.” Meeting your child’s needs encourages him to think about other’s needs.
- Supervise.
- Teach your child to walk away from annoying situations.
- Say “No! We don’t bite. Biting hurts”.
- Remove from the situation, but don’t banish your child to a room alone. Sit with your child to help her calm down.
- Teach “breathing”, “the silent scream” and “stamping feet” when your child is angry.
- Teach “trading” and “taking turns”.
- Stay calm yourself.
- Don’t grab toys from your child. Model the behaviour you want. Ask for the toy and wait for consent. Always ask to use something that belongs to your child.
- You could apologize for your child to the victim, to model what you want to see him do in the future.
- Don’t force apologies. They need to come from the heart. You can advise that an offering of an apology or amend might make the offended child feel better, but leave the choice up to your child.
- Tell the other child your child needs space, but doesn’t have the words to say so yet.
- Shower the victim with attention. Have the victim repeat the rule of “no hitting-hitting hurts” to the attacker. Remove the victim and take them with you to do something fun. Be sure to increase the attention to the attacker in peaceful times. Show them positive ways to get attention.
- Increase one on one time with the attacker.
- If hitting between two children repeats, find something else for one child to do and separate them.
- Acknowledge the feelings of each sibling or child and repeat it for the other child to hear, so they can start to learn empathy and conflicting points of view.
- If hitting repeats, children may be hungry, bored, tired. Fix the underlying reason.
- Model politeness. Use “please, thank you, no thanks” with your children.

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning *Parenting Speaker*, and Trainer, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling, “***Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery***” She specializes in “**Parenting the Digital Generation**” www.professionalparenting.ca (403) 714-6766
jarnall@shaw.ca

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