

## **Building the tool box: Helping children when they hit, bite and push**

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When your child hits, pushes, bites, grabs or otherwise acts aggressively, telling him/her to be gentle and to not hurt is only a small part of the information and support that they need to learn to understand and respect other people's boundaries.

Children can hurt each other accidentally, in which case, we can help them remedy the situation by narrating what you see and asking what might have worked better. Even though it's not always the case, but mostly when a child acts aggressively, their actions are driven by frustration and frustration can really overwhelm a child who's still slowly developing impulse control, especially when they lose their sense of connection and safety. As well as learning that it's not okay to hurt others, they need an answer to the question of; "but what CAN I do with all this frustration?"

Children hurting others is often **a cry for help**; as well as guidance relating to what you won't let them do, it's also generally a call for increased connection, warmth, affection, fun, laughter or perhaps they have some big cries locked inside their body that need an outlet.

**Your calm consistent patient guidance and support will pay off greatly.** Gaining more language and greater understanding of the information they're receiving also helps children to better communicate what they want or need without becoming physical. The child who can say "stop", "I don't like that", "I'm annoyed" is less likely to physically hurt another child when frustrated. When you respond by enquiring about their feelings -"Zack it looks like you pushed Sam over when he wouldn't share his toy, are you sad?" - this helps a child start to identify their feelings.

Be assured that your child's phase of hitting, biting or pushing is all part of their learning and is symptomatic of them still developing impulse control and healthier ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. It's not indicative of them being an "aggressive child" or a "naughty child". These issues mostly only become an ongoing problem when a child can't access the calm, level and warm support that they need as they learn.

**How else can the need be met?** When a child around this age goes through a phase of biting, it can be helpful to tie a teething ring or other object that they can bite onto a ribbon and safety pin it to their top or put it within reach and encourage them to use that when they have the urge to bite.

**Children, like adults, do better when they're more relaxed than stressed.** Think about what you can do to reduce your child's stress or minimize situations that may be over-stimulating. If your child becomes aggressive every time you go to the supermarket, then it's fair to assume that being in that environment is the problem rather than the child.

**Seeing it as a symptom of stress** (rather than judging a child to be "naughty") helps the parent (or teacher) to think creatively and do all they can to increase the child's sense of connection, safety and security. Are they finding interactions with certain friends or siblings stressful and if so, do they need more of your [calm non-judgmental mediation](#)? Perhaps your child needs for you to slow down the pace and maintain calm respectful communication, especially at vulnerable times like when the child wakes up or is tired or hungry. Quality non-directed time in nature can also do wonders for helping children come back to balance.

**Touching and handling your child gently and sensitively.** Touching and treating a child gently in your day to day activities of putting on their shoes, picking them up, restraining them in situations of danger, lifting them into their high-chair or car seat helps them learn to be gentle towards others. Even helping a child get dressed can lead to them feeling over-powered and result in them over-powering other children, as children naturally re-enact what they experience.

**Advance warning.** It also helps to prepare the child by explaining what you intend to do before and during normal activities; for instance "ok let's go and change your nappy shall we" giving them a minute to adjust, holding arms out and waiting for baby to come to you, this general approach increases their sense of having more power and decreases the fight flight response that often leads to the instinct to attack.

***Prevent the biting, pushing or hitting;***

- by shadowing your child if they are going through a phase of being aggressive,

- by intervening physically as swiftly as possible rather than expecting them to respond to verbal instructions; physically hold them as you tell them "I can't let you hurt, but I'm here to help you with your frustration",
- if they've already lashed out, keep the child who did the hurting close and involve them when caring for and empathizing with the child who has been hurt,
- if the child who did the hurting doesn't want to stay close, you can tell them "I care about both of you and will come and help you soon", this can seem counter-intuitive, but I consistently see that aggression fizzles out when children feel understood and helped,
- then showing care and empathy for your child's feelings of anger and frustration that drove their actions; "you got really frustrated, you hit your brother and now he's hurting", "that was a tricky problem for you wasn't it", "you got upset when Tom rode on your bike didn't you", this invites your child to share their feelings,
- your child knows what they did was wrong, they see the upset it caused, show them that you're working hard to keep everyone safe, to prevent one child hurting another and helping them get their frustrations out in non-aggressive ways like having a cry or asking for help,
- as soon as your child learns to really trust that their feelings are always important and deserving compassion, they will get better at seeking support before they reach overwhelm. Children who gain support learn to seek support, to release stress through crying or to talk when they start to become overwhelmed, rather than lashing out.

**Children who hurt others when frustrated feel insecure** and need to receive messages that they are safe. Quite often the child who did the hurting receives little care for their feelings. But the aggressor wouldn't have lashed out if they weren't feeling insecure, frustrated, threatened or possibly even overwhelmed. When children hurt another, they need to know that you're not just trying to make them stop being angry, they can't do that and trying to not be angry causes a lot of inner conflict and even more frustration. They need to know we understand and care and can help.

Show him that you can remain calm and confident as you help him with his frustration. **Your confidence in helping your child will start to ease any feelings of insecurity or overwhelm they may have.** Even when a child doesn't look afraid or frustrated when they lash out, if you look closely you will see that their body is in a very tight, tense stressed state.

**Show her what she \*is\* allowed to do when frustration builds up.** If at all possible, when you intervene and stop your child, hopefully just before they lash out, show that you're making yourself available to [really listen as they cry and complain and get it all out](#). Quite often the parent's intervention to stop their child, will provide the outlet they need to let the underlying frustrations push to the surface and gain some release through big cries. You can perhaps suggest that they roar like a lion, stamp their feet, jump up and down, scream into a pillow (which is less overwhelming than screaming into the air), maybe tear some old newspapers, pop bubble wrap, take their hand and do some brisk walking or a little run outside which gives them both an outlet and connection at the same time. Also, doing some slow deep breaths with them can help them regulate. A tight hug sometimes works wonders to dissipate tension if they allow that. There are many ways to dissipate frustration.

**Laughter heals and dissipates tension.** Another really effective way of helping them get their frustrations out is to invite them to push against your hands as you kneel in front of them, this will bring frustrations to a head and they'll either growl or laugh, either way it'll be a release. Or put a huge cushion in front of you and invite them to push really hard against the cushion. Or sit with your back against the wall also with a big cushion (for added protection for you both) and invite your child to sit on your knee, and push backwards with their bare feet on the ground. These all help the child release that ball of frustration from their belly or chest.

**Power reversal games** help a child release frustration relating to feeling powerless or controlled, any game where the parent takes on the role of being goofy, silly or the less powerful one can be very therapeutic, which can be measured by the intensity of the laughter that the game elicits! It can really help to have a pillow fight with you to give your child an outlet to their need to push and be vigorous, or scream into a cushion as you tell her it's safe to do so and you're looking after her.

Also, important to consider is that the frustration that drives a child to lash out is often the result of them not gaining the opportunities they need to have big releasing cries that are supported by their parent. The biggest need is always acceptance and empathy!

**To summarize.** To keep everyone safe, keep your limits simple, clear and confident - aim to [avoid pleading or being aggressive in saying no](#). Let him know that you won't let him lash out, that you're keeping everyone safe and helping him with those big feelings of frustration. She needs to see that you care about her big feelings, not just her behaviour which is only the outward symptom. A stressed child needs to see that you can

care about and empathize with her frustration "I see this is really hard for you, I can help", "I care about \*all\* your feelings, I'm going to stay here and care for you until you feel better", "that's it, get it all out, have a big growl/cry".

**Avoid isolating, threatening unpleasant consequences or punishing** or otherwise giving your child the message that you don't want to interact with her when she's angry as this can instill shame. In my work with families, children of all ages often describe to me what they truly feel about themselves and their parents when put in time out, and they are just not the messages that we want any child to embody. It's not necessary and can lead to long term feelings of aloneness when they have problems and difficult feelings.

**Your child especially needs your loving care and guidance when he's angry**, anger is a tough and often overwhelming emotion and deserves empathy. The child needs your loving support with their feelings of anger (that **are** allowed) when they act aggressively (which is not allowed). Avoid shaming him when he lashes out, he's already struggling with difficult feelings and needs help in coming back to peace with himself and his world. Kids act well when they feel well.