

# Aggression: Two to Five

The word aggression has many connotations, and most of them are bad. Images of violence are so pervasive in everyday life that many of us have developed something of an immunity to them. However, it's far more difficult to overlook our children's overtly aggressive behavior. We tend to be affected by it and to react to it quite strongly.

## WHAT DOES AGGRESSION MEAN?

Before we can figure out how to handle a toddler's or preschooler's aggressive behavior, we need to look beneath the surface to discover what it means. Aggression is never simply a spontaneous eruption of a child's negative impulses. It always means something.

Let's say that two brothers, a toddler and a four-year-old, are playing side by side in a family room. All of a sudden, with no apparent provocation, the older boy reaches over and knocks down the block tower his sibling had been so patiently building. The younger child howls, and a parent comes running. The parent immediately expresses displeasure with the aggressor—the older child—and perhaps punishes him.

Does it make sense to say that the four-year-old is a "bad" child who has "too much" aggression? I don't think so. What seems likelier to me is that the aggressive act is an expression (a misguided one, to be sure) of the boy's need to define himself as an independent person. The specific message he is trying to convey may be "I want to show you who I am and what I can do" or "I'll do what I feel like doing." At the same time, he may be making a plea for his parents' attention: "I want you to stop spending so much time with my brother and look at me." Or through his actions he may be saying, "I'll knock this tower down so that we can build it back up together," which represents a desire on the child's part to stop playing alone and engage his sibling in cooperative play.

## HANDLING HOSTILITY

It isn't appropriate to tolerate a preschooler's hostile behavior, yet parents should take care not to overreact. I recommend that they try to determine the meaning of the child's behavior.

First they should gather information. The child should be taken aside and asked, gently but firmly, what is bothering her. Even if she can't fully explain her feelings in words, her parents will usually be able to intuit what is going on.

If the child still seems hostile, the next step may involve putting her in another room for a cooling-off period. If she seems able to manage her feelings, her parents can redirect her energy toward some other activity.

By following these steps, parents are doing two important things: They are validating the child's need to be taken seriously, and they are setting a good example by encouraging the youngster to use words—not her hands—to express her needs. They are also showing her other options and helping her learn to manage and direct her energy in constructive ways.

## GIVING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

When parents respond aggressively to a child's hostile behavior—or if they use abusive language or gestures in their relationship with each other—they need to be aware they are giving a preschooler a clear message: Violence is an acceptable way to handle a difficult situation. This may not be the message parents intend to communicate, but it's the one the child will pick up.

All of us need a sufficient amount of healthy aggression in order to help us get things done. We need it to solve all kinds of problems, to play sports, to go out into the world and earn a living, and to raise a family. But we must not allow our aggression to control us; we must be in charge of it so we use it for good purposes. That is what children must learn, and what we as parents must teach.