

Aggression: Six to Eleven

We want our children to be assertive but not pushy. We want them to be tough but not be bullies. We want them to be self-confident but not boastful. We believe they should learn to put other people first but not be wimps. When it comes to aggression, parents give their children many messages, almost all of which are mixed. No wonder this is an area that involves so much conflict.

By the time children are six or seven years old, they are well aware that angry feelings are churning inside them. At the same time, they also have a sense of right and wrong. So, although they may be tempted to express their angry impulses in unacceptable ways, they know they should not. What's more, because they have the cognitive capacity to look at the world from a perspective other than their own, they can imagine what it is like to be someone else and experience the pain she may be feeling.

This doesn't mean that school-age children always behave empathetically; their hostile urges are not completely under control. The difference now from when they were younger is that when they do behave aggressively, they usually feel some guilt about it.

"BOYS WILL BE BOYS"

Boys and girls express aggression differently. Every parent, teacher, and clinician can validate that boys often use some kind of physical force: hitting, pushing, or kicking. Boys' physical aggression is fairly well tolerated in our society. "Boys will be boys," parents say, and for the most part no one is particularly bothered when boys fight. As a result, later in life boys may have difficulty expressing anger in constructive ways.

Girls are usually less aggressive to begin with, and we raise our daughters with a prohibition against physically aggressive behavior. Parents rarely encourage a girl to fight back physically against a bully. They may tell her to express her frustrations in words, but more often the message to a girl is to be "good" and suppress her anger.

Of course, suppressing anger doesn't make it disappear. Instead, girls learn to express their aggression indirectly. But this doesn't make girls' aggression any less intense than boys'. In fact, parents of daughters are likely to agree that angry verbal skirmishes can be every bit as painful as a kick in the shins.

In my work with school-age girls, I've found they are often uncomfortable about being direct and assertive. This means they may feel inhibited about making their needs and desires known, or even about standing up for their rights. It is a well-established fact that, in our culture, girls are raised to fulfill a nurturing role. So if a girl puts her interests first or pays more attention to her feelings than to other people's, she may feel guilty. To her, any normally assertive act or gesture may mean she is too aggressive.

If a parent uses a remark such as "Don't talk back" to dismiss a daughter's efforts to stand up for herself, the daughter may understandably come to feel that assertiveness is wrong. She may grow up lacking self-confidence, or become overly compliant and eager to please.

The real job for parents is not to squelch their children's aggression but to help them channel it in productive ways. For both boys and girls, this means fostering the development of a healthy sense of competition--in academics and in sports. Boys should be encouraged to articulate hostile feelings rather than act them out; girls should be supported in becoming more assertive about their needs and less concerned with pleasing others (including their parents).

The aggressive drive can help us or hurt us. If we teach our children to use the positive elements of aggression to their advantage and to keep the negative ones in check, we will be preparing them to face the future with confidence and strength.