

Preschool Struggles

Distinguish typical preschool behaviors from actions worthy of concern.

By Scholastic Parents Staff



Fighting over toys, temper tantrums, aggression on the playground or in the classroom: these are routine behaviors among the preschool set. The period between ages 2 and 5 is one of extreme, rapid developmental change, and young children make these transitions with varying degrees of speed and ease.

To learn more about when those everyday behaviors may cross the line into something more serious, we spoke with Dr. Susan Campbell, author of the newly revised and updated *Behavior Problems in Preschool*. Her best advice? Pay attention, but try to take it all in stride. Just when you think you've got a handle on

one irksome behavior, your tot's gotten over that — and he's on to something else. "Being a parent of a preschooler requires a sense of humor — and a sense of proportion," says Dr. Campbell.

Scholastic Parents: What are some negative behaviors that crop up in early childhood that surprise parents?

Dr. Campbell: In toddlerhood, children are trying to be independent. There's a lot they want to do, yet they can't quite do it. On top of that, their language and negotiation skills aren't that sophisticated. So they get frustrated and act out — that's when you start to see tantrums. Toddlers are constantly testing the limits of their own competence, which leads them naturally to say "no" frequently. Parents will suddenly find their sunny toddler being defiant and non-compliant. It's all a normal part of child development.

SP: What about aggressive behavior between children, like hitting, biting, or fighting over toys?

Dr. Campbell: Again, these behaviors are normal. They are more common in boys than girls, though, because boys develop language skills later, and so have fewer skills to work things out between themselves. They resort to aggressive behaviors more easily. Probably 95% of aggressive behavior in toddlers and preschoolers is nothing to be concerned about. The only time I would say to be concerned is if a bad behavior escalates, or goes on for a long time, or occurs along with other problems. But if your preschooler is going through a month or two where he and his siblings or peers are having toy struggles, for example, you shouldn't think there's anything "wrong" with your child.

SP: So, then it would come down to how you handle the behavior.

Dr. Campbell: Yes, at this age, how negative behavior is managed by adults, both teachers and parents, makes the difference. For normal bad behavior, the smartest thing parents can do is to be consistent, and to anticipate times when problems may occur. You have to be proactive, and head off situations in which there are likely to be tantrums. Many parents instinctively know this, or can learn it. They can divert attention, for example, offering a sibling a different toy when two children are fighting over something. Or offer choices, explain things on their child's level, and enlist their child's cooperation.

A great case study is the supermarket. In one aisle you'll see a 3 year old having a tantrum, and in another you'll see the same age child going along with his mom and "helping" her shop. This second mom probably is shopping at a good time for her child, when he's not too tired or hungry. She may have discussed with him beforehand that they were going to the market, that he could help by taking a loaf of bread off the shelf, and that he could have a treat when they got home.

SP: You say in your book that some negative behaviors are a matter of perception. What one parent sees as very bad, another might shrug off as normal. Please explain.

Dr. Campbell: If a parent perceives her child's bad behavior as a problem and it's not, how she handles it can make a difference. She can make it a problem, make it a big issue, or she can take it in stride.

Parents may not understand what their child is capable of at that moment. They may call something a problem — having a tantrum in the supermarket, or playing very aggressively with his peers — that's not a problem. What's very common is that parents will get preoccupied by an issue that's happening with their child *at that moment*. It's easy to do. Your child has bitten other kids, or is having weeks and weeks of toy struggles or other behavior issues, and you think it'll never end. But then it does. At the end of the day, as long as there's a solid, warm, supportive parent-child relationship, a lot will get better on its own.

SP: How can a parent know if aggressive behavior is related to a deeper problem?

Dr. Campbell: There may well be a specific stressor that's causing a child to act out. It's helpful for parents in that situation to step back and take a look at what's going on. It may be something obvious, like a new baby in the house, or a move. But sometimes it's something you would not have thought would affect your child directly, such as a problem you are having at work. Stresses you feel trickle down to your child. He may be reacting to the fact that you are preoccupied with a sick parent. And of course, if parents are separating, they both may be so consumed with their problems that they don't even realize just how much of an affect that has on their children. Then again, it's important to understand that kids are very resilient. They may be having an issue related to a specific stress, and a few months later, they're fine. There's very rarely any lasting damage.

SP: At what age is aggressive behavior more likely to be problematic?

Dr. Campbell: The older a child gets, the more worrisome aggression is. At age 3, you shouldn't worry as much; 3 year olds are still learning self-regulation, how to control themselves. But at 4, they should be able to self-regulate. Four year olds who are biting, hitting, being disruptive and noncompliant, may need intervention. In that case I would suggest the parent consult their pediatrician. Your child's doctor may have a lot of experience with these issues, and should be the first line of defense.

SP: What's the best way to handle aggression?

Dr. Campbell: What you say, and how you respond emotionally, both make a big difference. First, ask your child questions: When you bite Johnny, how do you think

he feels? Second, let your child know how his behavior makes *you* feel. When there is a good relationship between parent and child, the child will really take it in if he knows you're upset by his behavior. He has a lot to lose by upsetting you.

SP: What's going on when a child is well behaved at home, but his preschool teacher reports bad behavior?

Dr. Campbell: When this happens — or the reverse — you want to know what's happening in both those places. Let's say it's an only child with calm parents, and he attends a preschool that's noisy and chaotic. That can trigger bad behavior in the child at school, who's not accustomed to the noise and commotion. The opposite can be true. School is calm and structured, and the home is chaotic. So the child "lets go" at school. You'd have to look at what is eliciting the behaviors. It's definitely a sign that something's going on somewhere that needs to be looked at.

SP: What's your take on the issue of kids being expelled from preschool for behavior problems?

Dr. Campbell: It's probably inevitable. The more common it becomes for kids to be together in groups at younger and younger ages — child care settings, preschools — the more likely you'll see behavior problems, because there will be kids who are probably not ready for a structured group setting. In the past, they might not have had to deal with it until they were a little older. Kids develop at different paces: maybe that child is better off at home or with one-on-one care for another year. When a child presents a problem at preschool, it's often aggression with peers, and it's often the case that other parents are complaining. It would be nice if everyone - parents, teachers, caregivers - could stop and try to understand why it's happening and work on it, rather than kicking the child out, but that's not always possible. Schools have to be concerned about a child who is disrupting the whole group; and they can't risk upsetting everyone. But rest assured, most aggressive toddlers and noncompliant preschoolers will not end up delinquent, antisocial, or even poorly adjusted.

FEATURED BOOK