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# Aggressive Behavior in Toddlers

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Tips for parents and caregivers to manage aggressive behavior in toddlers and help children learn to manage strong emotions.

Tips for parents and caregivers to manage aggressive behavior in toddlers and help children learn to manage strong emotions and reactions as they become aware of themselves as separate individuals from their parents and the other important people in their world.

The period between 18 months and 3 years is an exciting time. Toddlers are becoming aware that they are separate individuals from their parents and the other important people in their world. This means that they are eager to assert themselves, communicate their likes and dislikes, and act independently (as much as they can!). At the same time, it's common to experience aggressive behavior in toddlers because they still have limited self-control and are just beginning to learn important skills like waiting, sharing and turn-taking.

### Consider the following example to manage aggressive behavior in toddlers:

*Sherman, aged 2, grabbed the red bucket and began shoveling sand into it. Jojo, the previous "owner" of the bucket, shouted: "Mine! My bucket!" When words don't get his bucket back, Jojo grabs for the bucket, but Sherman pulls it away and jumps out of the sand box. Jojo follows Sherman, pushes him, grabs the bucket, and returns to the sandbox. When Sherman approaches the sandbox once more, Jojo carefully guards his bucket, wrapping his arm around it and watching Sherman closely. Their parents, who had seen the drama unfold, walk across the playground and recite the "use your words" speech for what feels like the millionth time.*

As toddlers are also just beginning to use words to communicate (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/how-to-support-your-childs-communication-skills/>), they rely heavily on their actions to “tell” us what they are thinking and feeling. When a toddler wants a toy, he may take your hand, walk you to the toy shelf, and point to the one he wants, essentially “saying” with his gestures, “Daddy, I want to play with that toy. Please get it for me.” When he is angry, frustrated, tired or overwhelmed, he may use actions such as hitting, pushing, slapping, grabbing, kicking, or biting to tell you: “I’m mad!” “You’re too close to me, get away!” “I’m on overdrive and need a break.” Or “I want what what you have!”

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**With your support and guidance, your child will learn to manage her strong emotions and reactions over the next months and years.**

Like most aspects of development, there is a wide variation among children when it comes to acting out aggressively. Children who are intense and “big reactors” (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/temperament-intensity-of-reaction/>) tend to have a more difficult time managing their emotions than children who are by nature more easygoing. Big reactors rely more heavily on using their actions to communicate their strong feelings.

As parents, one of your most important jobs is to help your toddler understand and communicate their feelings in acceptable, nonaggressive ways. This is no small task. It requires a lot of time and patience. But with your support and guidance, your child will learn to manage their strong emotions and reactions over the next months and years.

## What to Think About

**No two children or families are alike.** Thinking about the following questions can help you adapt and apply the information and strategies below to your unique child and family:

- What kinds of situations usually lead to your child acting aggressively?
- Why do you think this is? When your child acts in ways that seem aggressive, how do you typically react?
- Do you think this reaction is helpful to your child or not? Why?

# What to Expect from Birth to 3

## From Birth to 12 Months

*Lacey, aged 11 months, wants a bite of the cookie her mother is eating. Lacey kicks her feet, waves her arms, and makes lots of sounds. But her mother just gives her another spoonful of squash. Lacey swings her arms and knocks the spoon out of her mother's hand. Squash on the wall! Lacey bangs her hands on the high chair and starts to cry.*

One of the greatest challenges in dealing with aggressive behavior is that it can feel very hurtful to parents, both emotionally and physically. When your baby yanks on your nose and won't let go, grabs at earrings, pulls hair, bites when breastfeeding, or bats his hand at you when you take away a forbidden object, it is perfectly natural to feel a flash of frustration or even anger. However, babies do not mean to hurt or upset their loved ones. They are simply exploring the world around them through their senses. They learn how the world works by biting, mouthing, grabbing, shaking and dropping, and swatting and seeing what happens as a result, which is usually a pretty big reaction.

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## From 12 to 24 Months

*Justin, aged 16 months, is having a great time with his father's cell phone. He presses buttons and makes all kinds of pictures come up on the screen. When his father sees what Justin is doing, he grabs the phone out of his hand and says, "No way, buddy. This is not for kids." Justin shouts back: "I want dat!" as he kicks his father with gusto. When his dad picks him up to calm him down, Justin kicks again with both feet.*

Aggressive behavior in toddlers (hitting, kicking, biting (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/toddler-biting-finding-the-right-response/>), etc.) usually peaks around age two, a time when toddlers have very strong feelings but are not yet able to use language effectively to express themselves. Toddlers also don't have the self-control to stop themselves from acting on their feelings. They are just beginning

to develop empathy—the ability to understand how others feel. So, they cannot yet say, “Mommy, I am mad that Zachary grabbed my favorite doll. But I know he just wants to play with me. So how about I offer him a different doll to play with?”

Instead, your toddler may bop Zachary on the head with a toy truck.

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## From 24 to 36 Months

*Bella, aged 30 months, is having a hard time saying goodbye to her mom at child care. As her mother starts to leave, Bella reaches out for her, sobbing, “Don’t go, Mommy!” Chandra, Bella’s friend, comes over to try and comfort Bella. Bella surprises her by roughly pushing her arm away and running to her cubby. Bella sits curled up under her coat hook, crying. When Talisa, one of the teachers, approaches Bella to see if she wants to read a story, Bella hits her. Talisa remains calm, holds Bella close, and tells her she knows Bella is sad that her mommy left and that it’s okay to be sad, but hitting is not okay. She then helps Bella get involved in an activity with her friends.*

Aggressive acts, such as punching a parent, often emerge when toddlers are overwhelmed by a distressing situation or by difficult feelings like anger or jealousy. These moments can be extremely challenging for parents because they are hurtful. Parents often expect that as their older toddlers become more and more verbal and advanced in their thinking skills, they are capable of more self-control than they really are. This stage of development can be very confusing because while your 2 ½-year-old may be able to tell you what the rule is, they still do not have the impulse control to stop themselves from doing something they desire. At this age, emotions still trump thinking skills almost every time.

The bottom line is that when you see aggressive behavior in toddlers, it is an important sign that he is out of control and needs help to calm down before any teaching or learning can take place. Staying calm yourself is the best response as it helps your child calm down more quickly. Read below for ways to handle aggressive behavior in toddlers.

# How You Can Respond to Aggressive Behavior in Toddlers in 3 Steps

## Step 1: Observe and Learn

Thinking through the following questions can help you see patterns and figure out what the underlying reason for your child's behavior might be. You can use this information to decide the best way to respond.

### What is going on in your child's world?

- Where is the behavior happening? Home? Childcare? Shopping mall? Grandma's apartment? Or is it happening in all/most of the settings your child is in?
- If it is only happening in one setting, could there be something about that environment (i.e., too crowded, bright, overwhelming, etc.) that is triggering the behavior?
- Is the behavior directed toward one specific person or a small group of people? Or is the behavior directed, at times, to anyone in the child's circle?
- When does the behavior usually happen? For example, right before nap time, when your child is tired? At times of transition, such as going from one activity to another? These kinds of stressors are common triggers for aggressive behavior.
- What happened right before your child's challenging behavior? For example, had you just announced it was time to stop playing and get in the car? Had another child just taken a toy out of his hands?
- Has there been a recent change in her world that is making your child feel upset, out of control, sad, or perhaps less safe and secure overall? Events like switching rooms at child care, moving homes, a new baby or the loss of a pet can make your child feel insecure and therefore less able to control her impulses.

Other important factors to consider:

- **Developmental Stage:** Is the behavior typical for your child’s age/stage? For example, some hitting (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/good-question/my-17-month-old-has-started-to-swing-at-me-when-she-doesnt-get-her-way/>) and biting (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/toddler-biting-finding-the-right-response/>) is normal for toddlers, but biting multiple times during the week would be more of a concern.
- **Child’s Temperament (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/tips-on-temperament/>):** Could the behavior be explained, in part, by your child’s way of approaching the world? For example, a very intense, sensitive child may feel overwhelmed in settings where there is a lot of stimulation, such as free playtime at child care. He may bite as a way to cope—perhaps to keep people at a distance to protect himself. A slow-to-warm-up child may hit a parent when left with a new babysitter. Fear often gets expressed as anger in young children (not to mention many adults.)
- **Your Own Temperament and Life Experiences:** Is this behavior particularly difficult for you? If so, why? Sometimes a parent’s own past experience—for example, having had parents with very strict rules about how to behave at a restaurant—influences her reactions to her child’s behavior. She might have a short “fuse” when dealing with her own squirmy child at the diner. Being aware of these kinds of connections helps you look at and respond to your child’s behavior more effectively, and in ways that are based on her age, stage of development, and temperament.

## What’s Going On With You?

- How do you handle your own feelings when your child acts out aggressively? Are you able to calm yourself before you respond?
- How effective do you feel you are in helping your child to manage his aggressive feelings? What works? What doesn’t work? Why? What do you feel your child is learning from the way you respond when he is aggressive?

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## Step 2: Respond to your child based on your best understanding of the behavior.

### How to Head Off Aggressive Behavior in Toddlers

- **Think prevention.** Use what you know about your child to plan ahead. For example, if you know that she feels very shy when meeting new people, you may want to start flipping through the family photo album during the weeks before you attend a big family picnic so she can start to recognize extended family members. During playtime, you might have a pretend picnic with her Aunt Laila and Uncle Bert. You may want to pack your child's "loveys" as well as a few of her favorite books to bring along. When you get to the event, help your relatives connect with your toddler by suggesting that they don't rush in for a big hug, but wait for them to warm up first. Using these strategies is not "giving in" to your child. You are helping them manage what, for her, is a very challenging situation. This helps her learn how to cope when they encounter new people in a new setting, such as school.
- **Give advanced notice of an upcoming change.** "We will read one more book and then it's time to get in the car to go home. Which book do you want to read?" (Giving choices can help children feel more in control and reduce aggression.)
- **Help your child understand her feelings and behavior.** This self-awareness helps him learn to manage his feelings in positive ways. For example, you might say to an older toddler who has a difficult time moving between activities: "It's hard for you to stop playing to get in the car to go to childcare. Why don't you pick out a favorite book to read on the way? Or we can play 'I spy' while we drive. Which do you want to do?" Over time this helps your child learn strategies to cope with situations that are challenging for him. With younger children, put words to their feelings and then redirect them. "You are mad daddy turned off the TV. But look at this cool ball and how it bounces."

### **Strategies for Responding to Aggression**

As you review the strategies described below to manage aggressive behavior in toddlers, keep in mind that their effectiveness may vary based on both the age and stage of development of your child and on his or her temperament. They are not offered as prescriptions, but ideas that can be adapted to meet the needs of your individual child and family.



- **Stay calm.** This is the essential first step. Try taking some deep breaths. You can even take your own “time out” for a minute or two to calm yourself. Staying in control makes it more likely that your child will calm down more quickly. When you get agitated, upset, and frustrated at your child’s tantrum, it often increases her distress. She needs you to be her rock when she is “losing it.”
  - **Recognize your child’s feeling or goal.** Let your child know that you understand what he wants to do: You want to play with the water, but you cannot spill the water from your sippy cup on the floor. Or, You are really angry. You want to stay longer at the playground, but it is not okay to hit mommy. Hitting hurts.
  - **Use words and gestures to communicate your message.** Words alone may not be enough to get your toddler to stop an unacceptable activity. To help your child understand your message, use an authoritative, matter-of-fact (not angry or screaming) voice. At the same time, use a “stop” or “no-no” gesture along with your words. You might say, No hitting, hitting hurts, as you take their hand and hold it by their side, firmly but not angrily. Keep in mind, it takes many, many repetitions, hearing the words together with the actions, before the words alone are enough.
  - **Offer alternatives.** Tell and show your child acceptable ways to reach his goal or channel his energy. If you interrupt your child’s behavior, but do not offer an acceptable alternative, the unacceptable behavior is more likely to continue. So for a little one who loves to dump their sippy cup and play with their drink, take them outside or put him in the bath where they can happily play with liquids. For a child who loves to hurl objects, make a game out of throwing soft balls into a basket or box.
  - **Try a distraction.** If your child is highly agitated, try a distraction. This is an unpredictable response your child isn’t expecting, like asking a child who is shouting angrily to join you in a game. Or just go to them and give them a big bear hug.
  - **Suggest ways to manage strong emotions.** When your child is really angry, suggest that he jump up and down, hit the sofa cushions, rip paper, cuddle up in a cozy area for alone time, paint an angry picture, or some other strategy that you feel is appropriate. What’s important is to teach your child that there are many ways to express his feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways, and to help him practice these strategies regularly.
  - **Have your child take a break.** Some children actually calm down much more quickly when given the chance to be by themselves in a safe, quiet place. This is not punishment. It is an important strategy to help children learn to soothe themselves and regain control—a critical life skill. Think of and call this safe, quiet space as a kind of “cozy corner”. It might have some pillows, stuffed animals, books and small, safe toys. Have your child help design it with you. The more they feel they have a role in it, the more likely they will accept using it. When your child does pull themselves together, it is very important that you acknowledge this big step by telling them what a good job they did calming herself down.
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### Step 3: Help your older toddler (2 ½ to 3 years), who is beginning to understand logic and rational thinking, learn from his actions.

Help your older toddler, who is beginning to understand logic and rational thinking, learn from their actions.

- **Point out the consequences of your child's behavior:** *After you hit Carrie, she started to cry. It hurt. She felt sad and mad. She didn't want to play with you anymore and that made you sad too.*
- **Brainstorm better choice(s) your child could make next time.** *If Carrie takes the doll you're playing with, what are some things you could do besides hit? If your child doesn't have any ideas (this is very normal), you can suggest some strategies such as helping her use her words: "That is my doll. Please give it back," and then offering Carrie another doll.*
- **Remind your child that she can always come to you for help.**  
Once you offer a few ideas, they might be better able to think of some on their own. The ability to substitute an acceptable action for one that is not acceptable is a crucial part of developing self-control. It is also an important skill for functioning well in school and throughout life. Also keep in mind that the best timing for this brainstorming process may vary for different children. Some may benefit from thinking the problem through right after the incident, whereas others need more time to cool off and will be more open to this process at a later time.

# Minimizing Misbehavior

## Ways to Minimize Misbehavior

### **1. Be consistent.**

Consistency with rules is key to helping children learn to make good choices. If every time a child throws a toy it gets taken away for a few minutes, he learns not to throw toys. But when the rules keep changing, it makes it hard for young children to make good choices. If one day a tantrum doesn't result in getting to stay longer at the park, but the next day her protests get her four more trips down the slide, your child will be confused about what choice to make, "Well, making a fuss worked the other day so maybe I should try that again."

### **2. Avoid negotiation.**

This is tough. We want to make sure our children feel heard, see us as open-minded, good listeners, and we want to be flexible. But negotiating about family rules is a slippery slope. A child who can negotiate for extra cookies or a later bedtime will quickly learn that this is a very effective way to get these "fringe benefits." Soon you will find yourself negotiating everything. Having consistent rules—about things like holding hands in a parking lot, sitting in a car seat, or brushing teeth—actually helps children feel safe and secure. They come to understand that there is structure, logic, and consistency in their world.

**3. Give your child a chance to problem-solve before stepping in.** Whether it is finding the right place for the puzzle piece she is holding, or negotiating with a friend about who gets to swing on the swing first, let your child try to figure out a solution first, before you step in to help. (When he does come to you to solve the problem, you might help him along by making suggestions: Blocks can be so frustrating! How about trying to put more blocks on the bottom so that your tower doesn't fall down?) You may be surprised to see how capable he is at managing conflict and dealing with the challenges he faces.

**4. Give your child lots of positive feedback when she shows self-control.**

Children want to please. When you respond positively to their behavior, you reinforce that behavior and also build their self-esteem. You stomped your feet when you were mad rather than hitting. Great job! Children who feel good about themselves are more likely to be well-behaved. It is important to help children experience and understand the natural benefits of good behavior. For example, if they cooperate with teeth-brushing instead of protesting it, there is time for an extra book at bedtime.

## When to Seek Help for Aggressive Behavior in Toddlers

Some aggressive behavior in toddlers is a typical part of early childhood development. However, if a child's aggression is interfering in his ability to interact with others in positive ways, in his ability to explore and learn, or if you find that because of your child's aggressive behavior you avoid having him play with other children or taking him to other activities, it can be very helpful to seek guidance from a child development professional.

Certain behaviors do warrant additional attention when they happen often and continue over time. Examples include when a child:

- Appears fearless or reckless, taking a “daredevil” approach to life. This approach often leads to breaking things or intrusive behavior (getting into other people’s space).
- Seems to crave high-intensity sensory stimuli. Sometimes children who need lots of “touch” to feel centered get this sensory input in unacceptable ways (hitting, shoving, pushing, etc.)
- Engages in unprovoked hitting; acts aggressively “out of the blue” or for no reason you can see.
- Shows a preoccupation with aggressive themes in pretend play.
- Begins acting aggressively following a traumatic episode or major life change.

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