

INFORMATION PACKET:

7 Positive Strategies for Managing Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

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ITP Topic: Aggression & De-Escalation Skills

CREDITS:

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Seven Positive Strategies for Managing Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

Irene van der Zande, Kidpower Executive Director and Founder

Meltdowns can cause misery for the child and everyone around them. The good news is that adults can take charge and get support to manage aggressive behavior in ways that are effective without being shaming. This article is from [The Earliest Teachable Moment: Personal Safety for Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers](#).

Parents, teachers, and caregivers of young children often come to Kidpower for help when their kids have trouble being safe with their bodies and their words:

- “My three-year-old daughter can be so sweet one moment and then explode in a flash. Yesterday she deliberately destroyed a sand castle and then threw sand into the eyes of one of her friends in our playgroup.”
- “My son used to be so mellow but ever since he started kindergarten he’s been copying another boy and hitting other kids.”
- “A student in my first grade class melts down when they don’t get their way and starts pinching, pushing, and sobbing uncontrollably.”
- “A boy in my day care center hates to come in from the playground. He’ll throw himself onto the ground in a full-blown tantrum, flailing, wailing, and shrieking.”

One of the most difficult issues when living and working with children of any age is knowing how to calmly, lovingly, and safely stop them if they are acting out in ways that are potentially harmful to themselves or others. Children who have lost control are likely to feel emotionally unsafe and may be physically unsafe if they are not stopped. Other children who see a child who is acting in a way that seems dangerous are also likely to feel unsafe unless an adult is taking charge of the situation in an effective and caring way. They might also start experimenting with imitating the behavior of the aggressive child.

Although aggressive behavior must be stopped, great harm can be done if an adult restrains an upset child in a way that is physically unsafe for the child or for the adult; acts worried or angry about the child being upset; or shames the child for losing control. Firm, kind, matter-of-fact adult intervention is necessary for everyone’s emotional and physical safety.

Although the following seven strategies were written to help adults with younger children, most of them can also be adapted for intervening when older children struggle with aggressive behavior.

1. Be prepared that children will sometimes have difficulty staying in charge of their behavior.

Children’s brains are developing, and they don’t have the same ability to control themselves that adults do. As soon as they can understand, it is important to begin teaching children skills for staying in charge of their behavior while understanding that they need adult supervision to stay safe - and they need ongoing guidance to learn how to act safely.

Often, children with strong leadership qualities seem to need to define their boundaries by pushing against the boundaries of others and by experimenting with negative uses of their power. With positive adult guidance, most of them grow up to be caring, respectful people.

Children who are highly sensitive sometimes act in ways that are not as “easy” or “standard”, and they often need adult support to learn behaviors that may be easier for other children. Some people who recall intense episodes of strong feelings in childhood later become gifted writers, visionary leaders, or imaginative inventors as adults. When children experience strong feelings, they need their adults to invest time, patience, effort, and compassion to help them learn how to handle these feelings constructively.

When children become overwhelmed, they might close down, tune out, become crushed with sorrow, or lash out verbally or physically.

Be realistic and honest instead of denying that there is a problem. Too often, people ignore out of control behavior as being normal until it escalates in a destructive way. Condemning a child who acts aggressively for being “bad” is also unhelpful. Aggressive behaviors do not mean that the children are bad or that either their parents or their teachers are incompetent. Meltdowns just mean that everyone involved needs support and skills in managing feelings before they reach the explosion point, in coping with overwhelm, and in controlling behavior so that everyone stays emotionally and physically safe.

2. Identify and reduce causes of stress that trigger outbursts.

Understanding the “how” and “why” of outbursts is important in finding positive solutions. Although the problem behavior can seem like a sudden explosion of feelings for no apparent reason, often there are patterns on when it is more or less likely to happen and some “lead up” time before the incident occurs. Even though this is time-consuming, taking a week or more to write down all observations on when and how a child gets upset often will provide insights into what changes might lead to reducing the outbursts.

Document the behavior. See if any patterns emerge about what is different on the “good” days and the “hard” days. Does anything stand out? Here are some very common triggers to consider:

Transitions. Even if doing lots of different things is very fun, too much change can lead to children becoming overstimulated. Many kids have far fewer outbursts when they have a calm, predictable schedule that includes time to play alone in their own space and regular special one-on-one time with their adults.

Sometimes a simple change of plan for a while can make a world of difference. For example, if your toddler throws tantrums in the store, consider making arrangements to handle shopping without her for a few weeks.

Make leaving a favorite activity fun rather than stressful. If your child gets upset about leaving the park, agree on a plan before going to the park about how and when you are going to get ready to leave and give him lots of reminders about how much time is left. When it’s time to go, stay cheerful even if your child is unhappy, give him something to look forward to about what’s going to happen next, and tell a story about a favorite character who does silly things in order to be able to stay at the park all night long.

For many children, starting kindergarten can be a difficult transition. A child might start to struggle with power and control issues in an attempt to manage a new environment. If your child is having a hard time, try to volunteer in the classroom both to help support the teacher and to understand more about the context of the problem.

Even positive changes such as a new sibling, a new home, or a birthday party are often stressful to a young child. Of course, negative changes such as a divorce, a parent losing a job, or a death are likely to be hard on the whole family and to require extra support.

Too hot or too cold. Some children can be highly affected by temperature. When they are even a little too hot or too cold, they are more likely to get upset — and they often do not remember (as they get focused) to take on or off their jackets or get a drink of water. Practicing making sure their bodies are comfortable is very helpful so they will remember in the moment.

Needing more sleep. Some children need a very strict bedtime and wake up routine to get enough sleep —some children just need more sleep, and when you are interested in learning everything you can about the world - like many five-year-olds! - it can be hard to get enough sleep. Some children need to start napping again for a while when they start new activities, such as taking a trip or going to a new school. Change is a big stress even when it is positive, and having extra sleep can help kids with the transition.

Needing more physical adult contact. Some children seem to need a lot of “cuddle” time to help their bodies to calm. Sitting and reading interesting books, playing games (while sitting in an adult’s lap) or being carried or held can be helpful.

Needing more physical activity. Some children need to move A LOT! In fact, moving can help them focus and integrate what they are learning. Being forced to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time can be extremely stressful for them.

Needing more space. Some children get overwhelmed when they get crowded by others. This is why so many difficulties at school happen in transitions — in line going to lunch, circle time, etc. Children often seem to bunch themselves together as they get more agitated, rather than giving themselves more space.

Have kids practice moving to the end of the line or the edge of the circle if they need space or calmly asking for some room. Have them practice stepping back and measuring with one arm to give lots of space in line rather than crowding forward. We tell kids it is more important to be safe in line, than first in line (something very important to many younger kids – and adults too).

Help a child plan how to get space at the lunch table or when sitting in a circle. Talk to your child’s teacher about this if you think this is an issue and have them help you with a plan that would allow the child to move to a less crowded spot in a way that isn’t too distracting to the class.

Over-stimulation. 'Less' is usually 'more' in preventing meltdowns. Try changing your schedule and structuring your day and space so that children are doing less, having fewer toys or games out at the same time, and slowing down. Reduce or eliminate access to screens and other technology so kids use their time doing imaginary play and being creative. If a child complains about being bored, don’t rush to fix it. Encourage the child to figure out interesting things to do on her or his own for a while and then make a plan to have your undivided attention at a time that works well for both of you.

Hunger. Not having enough healthy food to eat can also lead to a child being more likely to get triggered. Children get so busy, they can forget to eat, and then don’t realize how hungry they are. Or they fill up on junk food that doesn’t really nourish their bodies. Making a plan to make sure kids eat healthy food right before school, at recess, at lunch, and right after school can help.

Medical or psychological issues. If other triggers don’t seem to be relevant, a child who has a very low threshold for frustration and who is easily triggered in ways that become destructive or who shuts down suddenly should be assessed for an underlying medical, psychological, or neurological problem. Some children’s behavior has improved dramatically because of not being constantly irritated by an allergy or another medical issue, or because the source of the problem was figured out and addressed.

Even if a child is not acting aggressively, checking for potential underlying problems is important anytime a child seems to struggle without an obvious reason why. For example, my daughter at age 8 was having terrible trouble learning to read. No problem showed up on her regular check-up but, when I mentioned my concern to my own eye doctor in casual conversation, he checked her eyes out. She didn’t have a vision problem but she did have a neurological delay with how her eyes tracked together. Her relief at having a reason why she was having more trouble than her classmates was enormous. And, after a few months of adaptive physical education, she started to read easily and joyfully.

Once you have identified possible triggers, experiment by making a change and seeing if it helps. Try slowing down the day, increasing physical activities, reducing stimulation, an extra snack, a long bath, cuddle and story time before bed, controlling body temperature, etc. Minimizing triggers is unlikely to stop all explosive behavior, but it can help children to have the best chance to prevent and control this behavior.

3. Teach children how to recognize and manage the feelings and actions that lead to unsafe behavior.

Discuss what is going on to help the child understand. One mother named her child’s explosive behavior as having “fast feelings” which is a caring, nonjudgmental name to describe what happens when you suddenly get very upset and say or do hurtful things.

Acknowledge that feeling angry and frustrated is normal - and, that we have to learn how to feel our feelings while staying safe with our bodies. Tell stories about times when you felt angry and hit or kicked. Discuss characters in books that make these kinds of mistakes. Act out situations with toys to show the problem and safe solutions. Use our [Little Books for Literal People](#) strategy to create learning stories focused on the behavior the child is working on.

Teach kids skills for stopping aggressive behavior in the moment. Provide ways to use aggressive energy safely. All children benefit from having opportunities to be successful in being active and learning new things while staying emotionally and physically safe and in control of what they say and do. Yoga, for example, can be a fun way for children to practice getting centered using their bodies in strong, peaceful ways. So can the right kind of martial arts program.

When the child is calm, practice Kidpower skills as a fun and interesting way to be safe with people. Even children as young as two have been successful in learning and using these skills.

Calm Down Power — stopping themselves from being upset. Practice by having them pretend to be upset and then breathing slowly and deeply in and out, squeezing the palms of their hands together, and straightening their back. Remind them to use Calm Down Power when they start to get upset by coaching them through these motions and then congratulate them when they manage to do this even partially.

Mouth Closed Power — stopping herself from saying something that might be hurtful or inappropriate. Younger children might need to practice by pushing their lips together AND putting their hands over their mouths to help them to stop. You can rehearse by going over a situation that happened (i.e. being rude about another child being “stinky”) and having her get ready to say something mean and then stop. You can then come up with other situations. Do it multiple times a day at first. Reward her for practicing—a big hug, hi five, saying how proud you are, are all ways to make her feel good about learning.

Hands Down Power — stopping himself from hitting or hurting others. This can be done by pressing his hands down at his sides or putting them into his pockets so they are hard to get out. Role-play situations. Then have a cue —when you say “hands down” his hands go to his sides or into his pockets. Reward him for being safe with his hands —you may find an actual reward chart is helpful with this —with small tangible rewards that you phase out as he gets better at self-control.

Move Away Power — moving themselves to a quiet spot to calm down. Make a quiet space for them at home, school, etc. where they can go and take a breath or two, jump up and down, hug a pillow, whatever helps them to calm down but is away from kids they may hurt. Their adults need to be able to come and check in with them quickly if they move to this space to provide support if they need it.

Walk Away Power – moving away from trouble. Practice by pretending to be a kid who is about to push or poke, without actually doing this to the child. Coach them to leave with an attitude that is aware, calm, respectful, and confident.

Use practice as a natural consequence of making unsafe choices. You don’t want to make kids who have problems acting safely feel bad, but it is important they see the consequences of destructive behavior. Stop a child from being aggressive immediately and firmly, with loving support and simple clear language. “When you hit me, it hurts. I feel sad. Do not hit me. I love you very much. You are a good person. Let’s practice stopping yourself from hitting.”

Try to use the same simple language each time. If a child hits or hurts someone, the consequence can be to practice stopping, acknowledge the feelings that led to the outburst, review the “plan” on using safe ways to manage aggressive feelings, and then practice the plan together.

4. Create a plan for how to prevent and handle outbursts for every place the child might be.

If you have children who need help with anger management, anticipate potential problems and make a plan. Teaching them how to calm themselves down when they feel upset is a skill that will serve kids their whole lives.

Children are different. What works well in helping one child to handle intense feelings may be different for another child. Here are some specific suggestions from a Head Start and Kindergarten teacher whose students struggled with being safe with their bodies and their words.

Create a family plan for how to handle outbursts. You may need a few of them (one for when he feels very sad, one when she feels frustrated, etc.) or, maybe even more specific ones (how to handle someone taking your toy, how to handle someone saying something that hurts your feelings, etc.).

Describe the situation with each step that happens and that you want to have happen. Help your child make a new plan by breaking things down. For example, start with a story about what actually happens: 1) Lara feels angry, 2) Lara hits, 3) Friend gets hurt.

Now, create a new story with the steps you want to happen: 1) Lara starts to feel angry, 2) Lara takes two big breaths, 3) Lara puts her hands down, 4) Lara gets help from her mom/dad/teacher/etc., 5) Adult helps, 6) Lara feels better, 7) Friend is happy too. You may need to make the steps VERY simple at first, but write them down on a big piece of paper with pictures, or as a little book with drawings, or on big flashcards.

See our article [Little Books for Literal People](#) for a more detailed description of this strategy!

Give in-the-moment coaching. When a problem starts to come up, coach your child to follow their plan. At first, you may only be able to talk about it with them and then go through the plan after the situation is over and they have calmed down, but over time they may be able to stop and follow the plan in the moment.

Spend time working on the pieces of the plan, especially the parts on how to calm down. Help your child to identify feelings as they are happening or afterward when they are ready to think about what happened. For example, they can say they feel “hot” or “sad.” Draw a picture of the feeling or make a physical movement for the feeling (sad could be making a sad face or putting your finger on your cheek, hot could be waving your arm by your face). Have them make the movement if they can say the feeling as it is happening. The more you both can focus on the feelings as soon as they happen, the better able you will both be in helping to redirect the feelings.

Be prepared to manage bossiness. Sometimes kids who have trouble with control start “policing” other kids and even adults. While this can feel annoying, it also is pretty normal that children who are struggling with the rules themselves feel a need to tell everyone else about the rules. It can be a way they are processing the rules, or it can be to show that others don’t always follow the rules themselves or it can be part of their personalities.

What often works best is just to say, “You are responsible for you and ___ is responsible for themselves. You follow the rules for yourself and let them follow the rules for themselves. If you see someone doing something unsafe, tell me.”

A Success Story Using These Skills and Strategies to Make a Plan for Upsets:

For example, one boy, who we’ll call Sam, was having trouble when he started kindergarten.

Sam learned to identify how he was feeling right before he got upset (even though his outbursts before had seemed to happen abruptly). With his parents and teacher, he developed a cue where he would say how his internal thermostat was. Sam wanted to feel just right. He would put his finger against his chest: to the left was too cold, he was feeling sad; to the right, too hot, angry: and in the middle was just right.

Once he had identified his feelings, Sam learned how to do something about what he was feeling so he could get to the middle. If he was too hot, sometimes cooling down meant going with an aide to run around the field or he would get a drink of water and jump up and down 20 times to get out his energy. If he was feeling too cold, warming up could mean getting a cuddle from his teacher, holding her hand for a few minutes, or holding a stuffed animal.

Sam also worked on breathing in the moment, holding his own hands so he wouldn’t hit with them, and moving away to a quiet space where he had some room so he could be safer with his body. He started to have more fun and less problems at school.

5. Understand and stay in charge of your own emotional triggers.

We want our children to be happy. However, our job as adults is not to keep children happy all the time, but to keep them safe and help them learn and grow. Even though we know this intellectually, it can be hard not to take personally the negative things an upset or defiant child might say or do.

If you find yourself getting triggered by a child’s behavior, remember that, before you can be emotionally and physically safe in managing a child’s behavior, you must be completely in charge of your own feelings. Children are very sensitive to adults who project ambivalence, repressed resentment, or guilt. If need be, put your unhappy feelings aside to deal with later and focus on being compassionate with the child’s point of view while setting the necessary boundaries on behavior.

If you find yourself having a hard time with a specific child’s behavior, address your own feelings instead of wishing they would go away. Often, just talking about your frustration or irritation privately with another adult can be enough to help you gain more perspective.

If you feel that you cannot cope with your child’s behavior, consider getting professional help sooner rather than later. If a child’s behavior is causing exhaustion and conflict, sometimes a few sessions of play therapy or family therapy can give everyone tools for turning difficult behavior into an opportunity to grow.

6. Be a powerful, respectful adult leader when taking charge of an out-of-control child.

Children need to be stopped from dangerous or destructive behavior. They also need to see adults taking charge of safety in ways that are calm, respectful, and firm.

Having feelings of frustration, anger, fear, and embarrassment can be normal when kids are acting out. However, if adults act in shaming or hurtful ways towards kids who are behaving unsafely, they are showing kids exactly the opposite behavior of what these kids need to learn about how to handle feeling upset. Instead, show kids that, no matter what you might be feeling inside, you are staying in charge of what you say and do because their well being is important to you.

So, take a breath and get calm before you react.

Prevent problems by staying close to a child who has trouble being safe with her or his body and words so that you can intervene quickly, before the behavior starts to escalate. Be prepared to step in quickly and safely both verbally and physically by:

- Using simple words in a firm, directive voice, without screaming at the child, say, “*Put that down!*” “*No biting!*” “*No hitting!*”
- Staying close enough that you can easily take away a toy that is about to be thrown or stop a child’s hand from hitting another child.
- Moving to sit or stand in between two kids who are having trouble being safe with each other.

Some children will hear a stage whisper better than a loud voice. In an emergency, though, if a child is about to be hurt, be prepared to be forceful. If a child is about to run into the street, shout, “STOP!” and grab the child’s hand if need be.

If a child throws a complete tantrum, do your best to help them regain control while keeping everyone safe until this happens. Kids who have lost control usually need both physical space and emotional reassurance. Make sure the child is in a safe place and not about to get hurt or hurt anyone else. Stop them from doing something dangerous.

Even if a child does not understand the words, you can talk to him in a calm reassuring voice, saying things such as, “I am right here. I’m going to help everyone stay safe right now.” The message needs to be, “I care about you!” – NOT, “You are a bad child.”

Once the child is able to respond, give simple, clear directions in a warm voice to help them get centered and to communicate caring. “Here’s a tissue so you can blow your nose. Here’s a little drink of water. Let’s go to the bathroom and wash your face.”

If a child is able to understand, after everything is calmed down, you can discuss what happened and how to prevent getting so upset again. Never mention in any derogatory fashion what happened during the outburst. Instead, you can tell stories, practice skills, and make plans as described above.

Don’t contain a child physically unless this is a child you normally hold and you are emotionally centered yourself. Even if this is your own child, be sure you are being firm but gentle in how you hold the child so that you are keeping the child’s body safe without squeezing or hurting. If you need to be physically close to a child who is having a tantrum, protect your own body by staying out of the way of headbutts and flailing arms and legs.

7. For caregivers and teachers: If you are responsible for other people’s children, make a plan and get permission.

Agree ahead of time with the parents and/or your supervisor about how to handle behavior problems and what you are and are not authorized to do. Remember the Kidpower boundary principles that *Problems Should Not Be Secrets* and to *Keep Asking Until You Get Help*. If a child in your care acts destructively, tell the parents and your supervisor right away what happened.

- Notice problems when they are small, before they reach the explosion point. Work together with other staff, parents, and, if possible, the child to make a plan for stopping trouble sooner rather than later.

- Use your awareness to notice potential danger signals and intervene by redirecting the child firmly and kindly into a different activity whenever possible. Instead of lecturing about what the child mustn't do and why, focus on what the child CAN do by offering acceptable choices with enthusiasm.
- Have a plan for keeping the other children safe while you are caring for the child who needs help.

Different people in a program are likely to have different levels of experience and training, so it makes sense that they will have different levels of permission. Before you are left in charge of children, make sure you know what the rules are about restraining children in your care if they need to be stopped from destructive or defiant behavior.

Make sure your center or school has a plan that is clear about who has permission to do what if a child melts down in a way that is potentially unsafe and that spells out exactly what to do. What kinds of prevention tools are available to you? What are you expected to do to keep the children safe in the moment if a child has a meltdown? Who do you call for help? How do you call for help? What if that person isn't there? How do you report what happened?

In Conclusion

Children need to understand that all of their feelings are acceptable and normal, including anger. Everyone gets upset sometimes and wants to do hurtful things. As adults, we can help our kids learn how to stay in charge of what they say and do even if they are feeling very angry or upset at that moment. Being able to recognize when you are feeling upset, take care of your feelings in positive ways, and act safely no matter how you feel inside are tremendous life skills!

About Kidpower International

Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International is a global nonprofit leader dedicated to providing effective and empowering child protection, positive communication, self-defense, and personal safety skills to people of all ages, abilities, cultures, beliefs, and identities. Since 1989, Kidpower has protected over 6 million children, teens, and adults, including those with special needs, from bullying, harassment, sexual abuse, assault, abduction, and other maltreatment through our workshops, partnerships, and educational resources. www.kidpower.org

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2. List each title in this packet. In a few sentences, summarize the main purpose or key points for each section in this booklet:

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