

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Aggression as a Function of Development

COLLEGE STUDENTS RARELY SLAP OR BITE EACH OTHER when they're angry or want something someone else is holding. When upset, they are more apt to use words that bite or facial expressions that communicate their emotions. It's helpful to think about aggression in developmental terms if we want to handle situations effectively. Without this knowledge, adults in the past tended to dole out a slap for a slap or bite for a bite. It's hard to fathom that a teething toddler who innocently bit his mom would be painfully bitten in return to teach him a lesson.

For centuries, before developmental psychologists discovered states and stages, adults believed that physical punishment convinced children to relate to others with gentleness. It's still common for adults to get furious when children hurt each other. However, most people know that this fuels the problem rather than resolving it.

Teachers know they have to unlearn the human impulse to react to aggression with anger if they want to create a peaceful classroom environment. The goal is to calm children with a lack of intensity, offer logical consequences, and help children learn the skills they need to communicate successfully. The more understanding adults acquire about situations that foster aggression, the more skilled they become at diverting upsets into positive activity.

Hitting, pushing, or biting between preschoolers signals a failure in social interaction, at least in the moment. The children involved haven't yet mastered the skills of regulating strong emotions and explaining what they need in words. Teachers know that one of the central ways out of aggression is to practice, practice, practice social skills when difficult situations are *not* occurring. Acting out pretend play scenarios at circle time or in a small group helps children internalize the words they need at times when they *are* overwhelmed. We don't want aggressiveness to become a pattern that keeps a child from maturing socially.

Biting usually diminishes around the age of two. But even in older preschoolers, bites are almost never spurred by animosity. Sometimes when adults are aggressive, they have the intent to hurt, but young children act out because they are afraid or their impulses overwhelm them. Biting and other forms of aggression that tend to upset adults often persist when a child has a language delay or a sensitivity to noise or activity that leads to feeling overwhelmed.

Hitting, pushing, and other forms of physical aggression typically fade away between first and third grades, but teachers continue to work on developing social skills, since feelings of anger don't disappear with development. When anger turns into aggression in older children and adults, it usually comes out in negative ways of relating, like put-downs or exclusion. From preschool through the elementary grades, teachers try to bolster children's ability to empathize. The goal at any age is to awaken our capacity, as the Golden Rule states, to treat others the way we wish to be treated.

June 4, 2014