

## Fighting and Aggression

It is common for children to have disagreements or arguments at times. However, when children fight, the risk is that someone will be hurt. Fighting and aggression range from arguments, mean comments, refusal to share and common 'rough and tumble' play to more severe, destructive behaviour. If not dealt with early, fighting and aggression can get worse. Children may not learn better ways of behaving without help from their parents. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to play nicely with others, solve problems and get along with others.

### WHY DO CHILDREN FIGHT?

Children may fight or become aggressive out of frustration or anger when things do not go the way they want. Children may hit out at others if they do not know other ways of solving problems or have trouble saying what they want. They may also fight out of jealousy or competition, especially with their brothers and sisters.

Children may hit, kick, pull hair, push or call others names just to see what happens. Aggression usually gets a big reaction from the victim. Others may be aggressive to get what they want, such as making another child give up a toy or to get attention from their parents.

Children may learn to fight by watching others. If children see others, such as their parents, arguing or fighting, they are likely to do the same when they have a problem.

Sometimes parents are not sure where to draw the line between 'rough and tumble' play and hurtful behaviour. If the limit is unclear, it is hard for children to learn acceptable, non-hurtful ways of getting on with others and solving problems.

### HOW TO TEACH YOUR CHILD TO PLAY COOPERATIVELY

#### ▼ Explain the Rules

Decide on two or three simple rules for playing with others and discuss them with your child. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the rules are. Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Be gentle.
- Share and take turns.
- Keep your hands and feet to yourself.
- Use a pleasant voice.

#### ▼ Choose Some Activities To Teach Turn-Taking

Some activities promote sharing, cooperation and turn-taking, such as ball games, board games or computer games with two or more players. Start by playing these games with your child to show them how to take turns.

#### ▼ Encourage Desirable Behaviour

When your child is playing well, sharing and cooperating with others, give them attention. Talk to the children and ask questions about what they are doing — *You two are building a great castle there, how many towers will you have?* Praise the children — *I like it when you three play so well together or You're playing very gently with the others today, Brian.*

For the first few days, you may like to give your child a special reward such as a story or game. Tell your child how pleased you are that they played nicely.

#### ▼ Help Your Child Solve the Problem

Step in and help children solve problems before fights occur. Some children have difficulty saying what they want. You can help by giving them some words to use — *Isaac, say 'Aaron you've already had a turn, it's my turn now'*. Praise your child for politely saying what they want. Others may need help to decide who can play with a toy first — *Girls, you need to share the toy. Who is going to have the first turn?* Let each child go first at different times, no favourites. If a solution is reached, praise the children for sharing and taking turns.

To teach children how to solve problems for themselves, ask them what the problem is, what each child wants and what they can each do to compromise.

### HOW TO MANAGE FIGHTING

#### ▼ Tell Your Child What To Do

Always act quickly when you see children fighting with each other over something or snatching from one another. Speak firmly and tell them what to stop doing — *Judith and Vanessa, stop pulling on the doll — and what to do instead — Take turns holding her please.* Praise the children if they do as you ask.

#### ▼ Back Up Your Instruction With a Logical Consequence

If your child does not do as you have asked, use a logical consequence. Choose a consequence that fits the situation. Where possible, remove the activity or toy that is at the centre of the problem and explain why you are doing it. If the problem began with one child and they refuse to do as you have asked, take the toy from them and give it to the other child. If two or more children are involved and they do not reach a



solution about whose turn it is, use a consequence that fits the situation. For example, remove the toy or activity they are having trouble sharing — *Boys, you are not sharing the puzzle, I'm putting it away for 5 minutes.* Five to 10 minutes of missing out on the activity is usually long enough. Ignore protests or complaints. Do not debate or argue the point with the children. Simply carry out the consequence.

### ▼ Return the Activity

Return the toy or activity once the time is up, to give the children the chance to practise playing cooperatively. Praise sharing and taking turns. If the problem happens again within the next hour after giving the toy or activity back, repeat the logical consequence for a longer period, such as the rest of the day, or use quiet time (see below).

## HOW TO MANAGE AGGRESSION

### ▼ Tell Your Child What To Do

Always act quickly when your child becomes aggressive with someone. Speak firmly and tell your child what to stop doing — *Louise, stop hitting Mitchell* — and what to do instead — *Keep your hands to yourself.* Praise your child if they do as you ask.

### ▼ Back Up Your Instruction With Quiet Time or Time-Out

If your child does not stop being aggressive, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong and the consequence — *Louise, you are still hitting Mitchell. Go to quiet time.* You may need to separate children who are being aggressive towards one another and put more than one child into quiet time at the same time. Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly on the edge of the activity for a short time. Sit your child on a chair away from others. Tell your child they must

be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, use time-out. Say something like — *You are not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out.* Time-out involves taking your child away from the situation where a problem has occurred and having them be quiet for a short time. Take your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

### ▼ Return Your Child to the Activity

When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes in quiet time or time-out, let them rejoin the activity to practise playing cooperatively. Praise them for playing well. If aggression occurs again, repeat quiet time or time-out (the same consequence as the last time). You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out several times before your child stops being aggressive.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER

Try not to give in to the younger child by letting them have what they want.

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

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Avoid asking the older child what they did to cause the problem as they will not be able to tell you exactly what happened. Treat each child equally to avoid rivalry between them. Be fair. It takes more than one to fight.

You may wonder if you should be rough with your child to show them how it feels, but this is not a good idea. It will only confuse your child if you do exactly what you have told them not to do.

Problems can arise when older or bigger children take over and do not let younger children have a turn. Do not wait for other parents to come to your child's rescue. Be prepared to step in and ensure that all children share.

## KEY STEPS

- **Remind your child of the rules for playing with others.**
- **Praise your child for playing nicely with others.**
- **Help children solve problems before fights occur.**
- **Use logical consequences if children do not share.**
- **Do not ignore children who are being aggressive — act immediately.**
- **Tell your child what to do.**
- **Back up your instruction with quiet time or time-out.**
- **Return your child to the activity to practise playing cooperatively.**

As your child learns to play nicely with others, solve problems and get along with others, you will not need to remind them of the rules each time they mix with others. Even though you will discuss the rules less often, they will still apply. Use consequences consistently if the rules are broken. Continue to praise your child for playing cooperatively.