



Early Childhood NEWS

Managing Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

By Carolyn R. Tomlin

"Discipline is the slow, bit by bit, time consuming task of helping children to see the sense in acting in a certain way."

– Dr. James Hymes, pioneer in nursery school education.

Managing children's aggressive behavior has been a concern for parents and educators for centuries. Some people have an enthusiasm for living. They take advantage of their opportunities, get along with almost everyone they meet, and make positive contributions to society. Others are unhappy. They are unwilling or unable to use their abilities, incapable of forming friendships, and inclined to engage in activities that are destructive to themselves and others. What are the causes of such differences in human behavior? Since experiences during early childhood and adolescence have a significant influence on later behavior, shouldn't it be possible to observe how children develop and how they are influenced by experiences in order to find ways to help people live happy, fulfilling lives?

Current Theories and Practices

Grace Mitchell, although she spanked her own children, wrote in *A Very Practical Guide to Discipline with Young Children* (1982) that she would choose to discipline without spanking if she could repeat the years when she was a young parent. Today, she sees spanking as an admission of failure. Child rearing is a constant challenge. Each individual problem has a solution, but how often do we as caregivers *teach* our children to do the very things we punish them for? We yell or shout at them in angry tones and then we scold them for engaging in shouting matches with their peers. We criticize them, embarrass and humiliate them in front of others as if they were robots instead of human beings, but we are outraged when they indulge in name calling, hurt their friends with labels such as "Fatsy" or "Dummy," or resort to racial slurs and name calling (Mitchell, 1982).

Seth Schoier, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Vanderbilt University has developed a new approach to discipline with young children. *Play Nicely* is a media-rich CD ROM that teaches parents, health care professionals, counselors, and child care workers and teachers the basics in aggressive management for children ages one to seven. As part of the 30-minute video, viewers see a video clip of one young child hitting another and are asked, "Assume you see your friend hit another: what should you do? There are 12 options to respond and receive multiple feedback in the form of narration and video clips. Participants learn that there are better responses than ignoring aggression, speaking angrily, or physical punishment.

Dr. Scholer says, "My interest in aggressive management stems from my interest in injury prevention/violence prevention as a pediatrician/researcher at Vanderbilt University. My inspiration for developing *Play Nicely* occurred after I heard a presentation by Dr. Richard Tremblay from the University of Montreal in May, 2000. His work, and that of others, speaks clearly that early childhood aggression is one of the strongest predictors of violence later in life. After Dr. Tremblay's lecture, it became clear to me that we need tools to help teach caregivers why and how to manage aggression in the early years. Although it is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics that health care providers screen for childhood aggression and counsel accordingly, office time and physician skill sets may limit on how well this is accomplished. Thus, one of the main reasons that *Play Nicely* was developed was to help health care providers learn more about childhood aggression and have a tool that they can share with parents of young children."

Dr. Scholer believes the program provides caregivers and parents a database of cognitive skills that depicts children's social adjustment. This teaches important lessons, including the rule that aggressive behavior is not allowed (i.e. setting the rule), that they have options other than hurting (i.e. redirecting), and that others can be hurt by their behavior (promoting empathy). There is a general consensus among developmental theorists that early experiences shape behavior. Crick and Dodge (1994) postulate that early experiences lay down neural paths in a child's brain at a time when synaptic pathways can be created more rapidly compared with later life.

Suggestions for Managing Aggressive Behavior

To sum it up, caregivers need to know what to do when they see one young child hurt another one. What should you do if a child in your care hits another? Ignore it? Use time-out? Let parents deal with the problem?

Encourage parents to seek professional help if there are ongoing problems with a child's behavior. The following strategies will help both teachers and parents manage aggressive behavior in young children:

Teach children not to be a victim. When a child acts aggressively to another, encourage the child to whom the

aggression was directed to say, "That hurts." Then spend time with both children to discuss their feelings and to resolve the conflict together.

Do not allow aggressive behavior. Give children examples of how to be *helpful* with their hands. Set the rule by firmly saying, "No hitting."

Decrease exposure to violence. If children witness aggressive and violent behavior, it may be difficult to teach them to not be aggressive. Know what children watch on TV or see on video games. Limit TV time to less than two hours per day for children over two years old; no TV is best for children under the age of two.

Show love and consistency. Show lots of love. Give individual attention. Read, talk, and tell stories. Play with the children and be consistent with rules. Never ignore a situation in which a child disobeys a rule. Follow through with what you say or say nothing at all. Both parents and caregivers need to agree on the rules.

Some Situations Warrant Professional Help. Warning Signs May Include:

- Frequent aggressive acts toward others, self, or pets.
- Never follows directions, or listens.
- Does not seem attached. Rarely looks at you or touches you.
- Does not return to you in strange places. Frequently chooses violence on TV or video games.

Conclusion

Dr. David P. Weikart, Founder and President of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation said, "When we accept that learning comes from within, we achieve a critical balance in educating children. The adult's role is to support and guide children through their active learning adventures and experiences. Helping children to learn to help themselves is one of the most important ways adults can be of service to them."

Historical Thoughts on Behavior

More than 2000 years ago discussions about behavior and development began. Compare the history of behavior and managing children in 300 B.C. to those a few generations ago, then to the theories expressed today.

Plato: Greece, 330 B.C.: Man is gentle by nature but may become savage if improperly trained. Let him be trained insufficiently or amiss, and he will show himself more savage than anything on the face of the earth.

Aristotle: Greece, 330 B.C.: Nature favors some over others; not all respond to training. We must allow for individual differences.

John Locke: England, 1700s: All ideas in the minds of children come from observation and experience. The newborn child is like a blank sheet of paper.

Jonathan Edwards: United States, 1700s: Children are born evil and are wicked by nature.

Jean Jacques Rousseau: Europe, 1700s: Children are good by nature but cannot be left entirely to themselves. He agreed with Plato that the basic goodness of human beings may degenerate if the child is not provided with the proper education.

John B. Watson: United States, 1900-1930s: Give a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specific world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestors.

Abraham H. Maslow: United States, 1908-1970: External forces do not fully determine behavior; each individual makes his own self. Every person is, in part, "his own project."

B.F. Skinner: United States, 1940-1990: Outside causes of behavior are most important; the environment determines the individual – even when he alters the environment.

Frances Ilg and Louise Ames: United States, 1980s – present: Gone are the days when psychologist likened the child's body to a lump of clay which parents could mold in any direction. The home and other surroundings in which he grows up can influence the child's behavior. Many of the changes take place from within.

Do the observations concerning human behavior, some made hundreds of years ago, still apply today? How did these men influence the minds of many later theorists? Locke recommended parents praise children for good behavior and ignore rather than punish bad behavior. Jonathan Edwards, on the other hand, stressed "spare the rod and spoil the child" approach to discipline. Today educators, scientists, and psychologist try to understand the child and learn how the environment often produces aggressive behavior.