

Challenging behaviour

How to deal with difficult or aggressive behaviour from your child:

All children have moments when they lash out in anger, this may be by shouting, kicking, swearing or throwing objects. There are times when the aggression they show can seem particularly frightening and out of control, whether it's to parents, other family members or outside the home.

How does it make parents feel?

Parents often feel helpless about their children's behaviour and unsure of the best approach to tackle this. It is not uncommon for parents to feel responsible for their child's behaviour. The phrase "I love my child but don't like them at the moment" is often heard when parents are in this situation and it is the behaviour they dislike not their child.

Some parents are ashamed to admit that they can't control their children's aggression and are reluctant to talk about it, especially if the aggression is directed at the parents. If you are facing a similar issue in your home, it may feel like you constantly have to walk on egg shells, not knowing what could trigger another outburst. You may be feeling isolated and unable to share this with anyone as you may fear being judged for your child's behaviour. It is important to seek help as soon as possible; you are not alone.

What causes a child to act aggressively?

The behaviour is what we see, but there will usually be something underlying the behaviour. It may not always be obvious what the driving force is behind your child's aggressive behaviour. Your child may be feeling frustrated about something that is happening in their life, they may be having troubles at school, they may be seeking attention or it could be they are experiencing hormonal mood swings. Whatever the cause of their behaviour it may be quite clear to you that they are struggling to manage their anger and emotions. This can cause a parent to feel at a loss on what to do for the best. If you are feeling this, please do not lose confidence in your parenting, as it is natural to feel this way under the circumstances.

Managing aggression in your child:

It is important to try and set some time aside to find out what it is they are struggling with. It might not be easy for them to open up straight away and you may have to keep approaching them gently until they can open up. Don't try to force your child to talk. You might want to leave a book for them to write their feelings in if they do find it hard to talk. Let them know that you love them very much and are there for them but need them to meet you halfway.

Acknowledge their feelings:

You can't wave a magic wand and vanish away a child's unhappy feelings. What you can do is help them learn how to manage what they do about them. So encourage them to say how they are feeling, "I feel angry/left out/upset", instead of hitting out.

Let your child know that feeling angry and upset at times is natural and acceptable and most people do at some point or another. Try to acknowledge their feelings, but set limits: "I can see that you feel angry, but I don't want to see any hitting, biting, shouting or swearing."

Identify the triggers:

Try to identify the triggers for your child's anger. You could keep a diary so you can write down the incidents, note down the triggers and see if there is a pattern. Are there particular events that set your child off? If you start to see when, you can sometimes work out why.

Defuse the anger:

Learn how to defuse an angry situation. Lower your voice instead of shouting and look them in the eye. Talk with and listen to your child when they're calm.

It isn't easy showing affection to a child who is being hurtful, but they need to be shown that they are acceptable. Separate the child from the behaviour by saying, "I love you and always will, but I don't love what you're doing."

Be positive and praise them when they do well to promote their self-worth. Blaming, shaming, or punishing children can make them feel worse about themselves and may lead to even more aggression.

Children learn by example:

If children see problems solved with raised voices or violence, they learn to follow suit. If you want to stop a child being aggressive, you may first have to address what is happening around them. It may be difficult to explore this but if there is conflict in your family life or perhaps communication is often through shouting, they may have learned this behaviour.

If you need further support:

Coping with an aggressive child is very challenging and no parent should expect to have to do this alone. Contact our Learning and Pastoral Mentor or your child's teacher if you need further support.