



Safe and Caring is a centre of excellence that fosters effective networks and partnerships to improve the quality of life for all Alberta children and youth.

PRESCHOOL BULLYING

This information distills the insights of experienced teachers, early childhood educators, parents and social researchers on early learning and aggression and outlines some general approaches that parents and other caregivers can use to teach appropriate behaviour, emotional recognition and control, and social interaction skills that support healthy relationships. If you are reading this information because you are concerned about your child's aggression, please see a professional, such as a public health nurse, doctor, psychologist or social worker.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

The most obvious forms of bullying are repeated hitting, shoving, chasing or threatening. Other forms include name-calling, teasing, telling lies and excluding. Bullying also includes taking or destroying another child's belongings.

Is there a difference between playing and bullying?

Play builds the imagination, develops physical coordination and teaches children about rules, roles and possibilities. Occasional roughness between young children is a normal part of play. Aggressive behaviour, especially if uncommon or for a short period of time, is often the result of physical or emotional stress caused by conditions like hunger, anger, fatigue, illness, or external factors such as divorce, death of a pet or a new sibling.

Bullying is different from occasional rowdiness or behaviour problems under unusual circumstances. Bullying is repeated roughness or repeated planned verbal or physical attacks. The intention of bullying is to cause deliberate hurt, or to gain more power and control. Bullying occurs consistently between the same children, with each consistently playing the same role—one child is bullied and the other child does the bullying. The young child who experiences bullying is usually younger, smaller and weaker, and lacks the skills to cope with the aggression.

What are the consequences of bullying?

Young children who experiences bullying often become shy, isolated and fearful. Young children instigating the bullying believes that conflict is best resolved using threats or force; bullying behaviour provides a false sense of the child's own importance and power and sets them up for social failure.

By helping young children develop strong healthy relationship skills early, bullying can be prevented now and in the future.

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Brain development – the early years

The brain is an extraordinary organ. Unlike a liver or muscles, though, it requires emotional nourishment in addition to physical nourishment to grow and be healthy. For years, studies have shown that during the first three years of life the basic “wiring” of the brain—the connections between billions of neurons—is developed based upon a child’s early experiences and interactions with people. By the age of six, the basic pathways are set for vision using both eyes, emotional control, habitual ways of responding, language and literacy, and perceptions of symbols and relative quantity.

When a child faces insecurity and stress, more neural networks form in the lower brain centres, where animal-like responses reside (the flight-or-fight instinct, for example). When a child is surrounded by familiar structures and support, more neural networks form in areas of the brain that support long-term memory storage and retrieval. In addition, it has been found that a constant state of alarm or fear limits the ability to pay attention and decreases the ability to learn. Researchers also find that early antisocial behaviours are indicators of later problems.

Young children learn by seeing, hearing, talking and doing things over and over again. The first years of a child’s life are spent learning skills that range all the way from eating and walking, through talking and toilet training, to dressing, printing and working the TV remote. These skills are only learned through diligent effort, consistent teaching and hours of practice. The same is true of relationship skills: they take practice and effort to learn, and even more effort and support to apply well.

Can parents make a difference?

Yes! The lessons you teach your children in their first few years will leave an indelible mark on them for the rest of their lives. You and the other people involved in raising a child are already teaching countless life skills, like eating, washing and dressing, and you are also setting the foundation for lifelong learning, social behaviour and health. You are probably teaching those skills with patience, good humor and consistency. The same qualities are required when teaching healthy relationship skills.

You are an effective parent when you teach your child how to do the right thing. If you can get your child to do the right thing even when you’re not looking, then you know you’ve done something right.

Reasonable behaviour for preschoolers

THE FIRST YEAR

Your best alternative for discouraging unwelcome behaviour is to distract the child. Indeed, during the first year of life, the word no barely registers on infants; they may understand that you are angry but do not understand the link between actions and their consequences. Give them lots of attention, affection and security, and give lots of positive feedback for positive interactions with others.

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THE SECOND YEAR

Toddlers of this age may play in the same area, but they likely aren't playing together. At this age, children tend to play independently even when they are together, and they tend to imitate each other rather than interact. Even so, conflicts can arise. Usually, though, aggressive behaviour is the result of frustration and misperception, not the intent to hurt.

During their second year, children observe, learn and understand much more than they can tell you. They are the centre of their universe, and that universe is getting bigger every day. They learn something every time they explore, experiment, seize, probe, and push. They want to own everything they see, including things that belong to other people, and they cannot comprehend concepts like sharing, avoiding danger or handling a valuable object carefully. Furthermore, they cannot communicate their desires because their language skills are limited. This may cause some frustration and elicit behaviour that seems aggressive, such as dragging you or a playmate along by the arm to show you something. Children at this age do not understand the difference between right and wrong and cannot understand why parents say "no." They want to do things, like open containers or push the vacuum, but lack the physical skills, strength and coordination. The natural response to situations like this, when their desires are out-of-sync with their skills, is frustration.

Toddlers frequently experience frustration but have limited resources for handling it, and therefore often express their feelings in aggressive behaviour: be prepared for tantrums, crying, biting, throwing, screaming, hitting, yelling and more. Toddlers follow their aggressive instincts and need to learn how to tame them.

Toddlers cannot absorb long lectures about appropriate behaviour. Instead, frequent repetition of small messages is the most effective way of communicating. Firmly say things like, "No hitting," or "We do not push our friends," and be consistent with your reasons for saying "no."

It is important to remember that young children are acting on instincts. Your objection should be to the behaviour, not to the child, and your response to the inappropriate behaviour should include helping the child learn a better and more positive way to behave.

THREE-TO-FIVE YEARS

This is a time of great intellectual growth. Children can follow stories, grasp new ideas and talk about them. They are ready to learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and about other people.

There are still limitations, however. At this age, children understand that hitting hurts others. Even so, they may not always be able to stop themselves from aggressive or hurtful behaviour nor can they foresee the consequences of their actions; children in this age group cannot readily understand that they can avoid hurting others by not hitting them. Still, they do generally possess some degree of self-awareness: if they make others cry, they typically feel some regret for having done so.

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AGGRESSION, ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

Tantrums

Tantrums are most common during the ages of two and three but occur throughout early childhood. Generally, tantrums are an explosion of pent-up anger and frustration when a toddler becomes temporarily overwhelmed by rage. When this occurs, make sure your child is not about to hurt himself, then take a step or two away. Wait for him to vent his frustration and calm down. Calmly tell your toddler that you understand his feelings of frustration and anger. Tell him that these feelings are OK and that you will help him deal with them in other ways. Tell him that it is much easier to talk about things when he is not screaming or crying, and that you are glad he has stopped.

Your calmness is important for both of you. First, it helps you to maintain some semblance of dignity while your toddler is screaming and flailing about on the floor of the mall and passersby may give you disapproving looks. Your calmness can prevent a temporary problem from becoming a protracted one. It also lets you keep your focus on your child, not on your embarrassment, your anger or onlookers' opinions. Your calmness models a behaviour for handling frustration or anger. It conveys the sense that you do not handle frustration with wild outbursts. If the child is angry because he is not getting what he wants, your calmness reinforces the point that tantrums are ineffective ways of making you relent and give in to his demands.

Anger

There is little point talking about anger when either one of you is angry. Young children don't listen when they are angry, and you are probably not at your most effective. Nonetheless, talking about anger and other emotions that lead to aggression (frustration, disappointment and envy, to name a few) is an important tool in preventing bullying behaviours. Teach children the words for emotions and how to think and talk about emotions. Look at pictures of people in different emotional states, and talk about what you see. Shortly after an emotional incident has passed, discuss the incident with your child by asking questions about why he was angry or why he hit the other child. Help children to understand that anger is acceptable but physically acting out is not. Develop ideas about what appropriate responses would be, such as telling people you don't like what they just did, counting to five before saying anything, telling an adult that something is wrong or refusing to play with a person who has been hurtful. If your child has hurt others, explain that his friends will probably not want to play with him if his behaviour doesn't change.

To help your child conceptualize emotional responses, try a simple emotion exercise using different "buttons"—sadness buttons, happiness buttons, anger buttons. Explain that emotions can be started just like toys can be started by pushing a button. When something pushes your anger button, you feel a bit angry. The more it gets pushed, the angrier you get. As children mature, they can learn to identify what triggers the emotions. Eventually, they will be able to stop to think before acting on an emotional response.

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Preventing conflicts

Young children are usually closely supervised, so parents or caregivers are often in a position to prevent conflict or take steps to reduce the likelihood of problems. By having a reasonably consistent structure to the day, you can reduce a child's stress and resistance to change. By frequently switching the pace of activities, you keep boredom at bay. If you see an empty-handed child, get him or her involved. Busy children have more interesting things to do than fight with each other. If you are going to step out of the room, be sure that everyone is occupied before you leave. If one child is having a bad day, take that child with you while you get lunch ready or attend to other tasks.

When push comes to shove

It is common for young children to hit, bite, push or hurt their siblings, playmates or pets. If you observe such behaviour, a strong "No!" is reasonable. Never hit, bite, push or hurt the child in retaliation; this sends the message that violence is the proper and acceptable response. Children can understand clear, short sentences by about the second year. Saying things like, "When you hit Jason, it hurts him" conveys the idea that others have feelings, too. This marks the first steps in building empathy. As children become more verbally and socially skilled, teach them how to use words, rather than fists, to make points.

Resolving conflicts

It is common for young children to argue, banter and tell each other what to do; these actions are all part of learning to get along and interact with others. Indeed, when children argue, adults should not always intervene. After all, you want your children to learn to solve some of their problems themselves. However, it is important to keep a reasonable standard of behaviour in mind, depending upon the age of the children and the situation. If your child takes toys away from others, intervene. Try, "Ryan is playing with that now. You may have it next," or "Stephen wasn't finished playing with the car. Please give it back to him." Help children involved in a conflict re-enact appropriate ways of asking, discussing and sharing. Provide positive descriptive feedback afterwards. "You asked Peter to share the trucks. Using a polite voice helped him listen to you."

Provide an outlet

Ensure that children have ways to let off steam. Let younger children bang on pots with wooden spoons or knead dough. Let preschoolers punch a pillow. Create opportunities for them to yell, run, jump, climb, throw and kick. All this physical activity helps them burn up energy so they can settle down later in the day.

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GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

Setting limits

It is reasonable to start setting some limits beyond those required for safety. Be consistent in applying limits, even when it may seem too early for your child to understand them. This is essential for two reasons. First, if you do not start with basic limits now, it will be difficult for your child to adjust to limits later. Second, by setting the groundwork early, you are also establishing your right to set limits—something you will be doing for the rest of childhood. Although limits may vary widely from family to family, they are essential. They help children learn to consider the rights of others and respect others, which are two principles underlying positive social behaviour.

Saying “stop”

Teaching children to say “stop” in friendly situations prepares them to say it when play gets out of hand or when they are confronted by a child who tries to bully them. Encourage children to say “stop” or “no more” or “this isn’t fun any more” during tickle fights, monster chases and other physical games with you. Use the child’s judgment—not yours—about how much is enough. Then remind him or her that you are stopping because you were asked to. When you say “stop” in other games, make sure that the child is listening. Look the child in the eyes, and repeat that you have had enough and want to stop. If necessary, stand up, walk away or otherwise end the game. Help children learn that everyone has the right to say “stop” and be heard. This helps reinforce the idea that there are limits to behaviour and that different people draw the line in different places. No matter what the game, the rule is that the game must stop if someone gets hurt or does not want to continue.

Making choices

As soon as they can point, young children are capable of making choices. They can decide which socks to wear when given a choice; they know which sandwiches they prefer in their lunch. If you give them the opportunity to choose and respect the decisions they make, children gain confidence in their own decision-making ability. Though choosing a pair of socks might not seem like an accomplishment, it is an important first step in building a child’s confidence and preparing her to make more and more difficult choices. Small decisions early in life alert children to the possibility of alternatives, different responses, admitting mistakes and choosing to set things right. These skills are an important part of relationship building.

Playing fair

When playing games, make sure that children know the rules and insist that they follow them. If your child is involved in group games or sports, emphasize good sportsmanship over individual talent or recognition. Help children see that fair play involves staying within certain limits. Help your child understand that losing is OK and that being a good sport is important.

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Watching others

We learn by imitating other people. Show children the behaviour you want them to imitate and emphasize that bullying is not acceptable. For example, at the park, point out children who are playing well together. Comment on the lineup of children taking turns on the slide. Bear in mind, though, that you should never make your child feel that he or she doesn't measure up. For example, after pointing to a group of children behaving nicely, don't say, "Why can't you be more like that?"

Role playing

Help children develop social skills by role-playing. Get down on your knees so that you are the same size as your child and play "friends." Work out acceptable ways to share toys, build castles and take turns. Don't allow your child to get his or her way all the time; an important part of playing well together is sharing decision making.

Be a role model

Do you use physical force and threats to get your child to behave a certain way? If so, don't be surprised if your child imitates this behaviour—it's what she's learned by watching you. Try other approaches instead. Be firm without being forceful. In exasperating situations, try to retain your right to make the rules and expect a certain behaviour, but do so without using physical force.

Modeling lapses

No one is perfect all the time. When you slip up, admit it. If your child sees the mistake, tell her why it was a mistake. Allow your child to see you apologize to someone once in a while.

Pointing out the effects

It might not be obvious to children that pushing, fighting and bullying actually hurt. Therefore, explain in simple language that such behaviour hurts others, but it also hurts the child doing the bullying—other children don't want to be friends with someone who bullies them. Aggressive, bullying behaviour also hurts you as a parent, because you know that your child is capable of better behaviour. Emphasize to children how much their behaviour and decisions affect others.

Making restitution

From very early on, children can make up for their mistakes. If your child spills his milk, give him a paper towel to help clean it up. If she colours on the wall, she can help scrub it off. If he hurts someone, he can say sorry and do something nice for the person to apologize. The concept of restitution reinforces the idea that all behaviour has consequences. Bullying is not a "profitable" behaviour if you have to make amends.

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Practising values

It is important to tell your child that physical aggression is not the way to solve problems. It is even more important to practise what you preach. First, if you are not the only adult who cares for your child, confer with the other caregivers to ensure consistency with respect to expectations. Otherwise, children can become confused about what the rules really are.

Sometimes it can be difficult to live by the standards we set for our children. To emphasize the importance of solving problems without physical aggression, you must avoid physical aggression yourself. The same holds true for all the other behaviour and qualities you value: politeness, honesty, courage or persistence.

Even if you start explaining your decisions before you think your child will understand, you are helping to convey the message that the first reaction to a problem is not hitting or yelling. Try to talk out resolutions to conflict. Say things like, "Let's find a way to agree."

IS YOUR CHILD BULLYING OTHERS?

Identify the warning signs. The most frequent characteristics of a child being overly aggressive (and hence the potential to bully) are as follows:

- multiple temper tantrums in a day, or several tantrums lasting more than 15 minutes
- consistent refusal to follow directions
- a desire to be the boss all the time
- impatience
- indifference to having hurt someone
- cruelty to other children or to animals
- insistence on always getting his or her own way
- the use of anger or threats to achieve goals
- a failure to return to parents for a brief hug or touch in a strange situation

Eliminate the possibilities

Is your child being excessively aggressive because of frustration caused by other problems? Do not excuse aggressive behaviour, but do look for its sources.

- Can she hear properly and speak appropriately? A failure to communicate can be a source of great frustration.
- Does he feel that the only way to get your attention is to act out? Give plenty of attention, smiles and hugs for good behaviour.
- Is there physical aggression in your home which the child is carrying over to other relationships? Deal with adult problems first.
- Is the child being picked on herself and taking it out on someone else?
- Does the child feel they have no control of their world? (Frequent changes in residence, daycare, daily routine and authority figures can contribute to this.)

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Remediating some of these problems might help. If it doesn't, you need to look further and may even need to seek outside help.

Teach, don't punish

Take a considered approach and try not to react with anger or disappointment. You cannot teach a child how to manage anger when you cannot control your feelings of disappointment at misbehaviour, if you are embarrassed that another adult might think you incompetent, or if you are worried that the daycare staff have labeled your child. Wait until you calm down before reacting.

Make sure that children know that you object to the behaviour, not to them. If children believe that violence is an effective way to deal with people and solve problems, you must teach them that this is not true. It does not matter where your child learned the lesson—it could have been from physical aggression in movies or television, from an older sibling, from a playmate or even from you. The point is, the lesson has been learnt. It's up to you as the parent to teach your child alternatives.

Finally, but most importantly ensure that children know that they are loved.

Try talking

In some cases, children might simply be oblivious to the results of their actions. Talk to them about their behaviour. Say things like, "Did you mean to make Zachary feel sad?"; "Why would you do that?"; "How do you think he feels when you break his toys?"; "How would you feel if he did that to you?". Explain the limits and emphasize that it is OK to be disappointed when you do not get what you want, but it is not OK to hit or hurt another person.

Check for perspective

Children who are impulsive and aggressive often see every single bump, nudge or slight as a hostile act directed specifically at them, and they react in kind. Help these children recognize the difference between accidents and intentional behaviour. Then, when accidents happen, children can accept an apology and move on to something else.

Stay on track

It's sometimes hard to know how forceful you should be when dealing with acts of aggression by your child. You don't want to come across too strong, but at the same time, if your parenting style is too hands-off, your child might dismiss your authority. Don't argue with your child and don't debate your right to set the rules. Explain that the behaviour is not acceptable. Period. Make it clear that there is nothing that the other child could have done to deserve such treatment, then offer some appropriate responses to replace the bullying behaviours.

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Talk about differences

What is the trigger for aggressive behaviour? Does another child discredit or upset your child by doing something better or by winning a game? Is another child different in some way? Remind your child that different people have different physical attributes, skills and talents. Get a mirror and compare yourself and your child. You are different sizes, have different hair color, wear different clothes and so on. Identify one of your child's skills and use it as an example. "You are very good at making puzzles. Does Jeremy hit you every time you make a puzzle faster than he does? How would you like that? You and Jeremy are different people. He doesn't hit you because you are different. Why should you hit him?"

Practise good behavior

Help your child do kind things for other people, preferably people who say thank you and demonstrate appreciation. Make positive comments when your child resolves a problem without using force. Look for opportunities to notice and give positive feedback for positive behaviour throughout the day.

Seek reconciliation

If your child demonstrates bullying behaviour toward another child, it is important to settle accounts with that child and his parents. Sometimes an apology will suffice but sometimes your child may need to make a special effort. If a broken toy should be replaced, make sure your child goes to the store with you when you make the purchase. A hand-made apology card is also a good idea.

Media and aggression

A number of studies have identified links between television viewing and aggression. Because children learn from their experiences, it seems reasonable that the experience of viewing violence, arguments and aggressive behaviour on television and other media provides children with mental notes on how to behave. After all, many preschoolers think Big Bird and Barney are just as real as their parents.

You can take two steps to ensure that children do not adopt the violent behaviour they see on television or video games; first, intentionally limit exposure by restricting the type of program and the amount of television they are allowed to watch. Second, discuss the violence onscreen and your objections. Ask leading questions like, "Weren't those boys mean to Dumbo? See how sad they made him."

IF YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCES BULLYING

A parent's first reaction is to defend a threatened child. While our instincts might tell us to lash out at the child who is doing the bullying, it is important for both children that the matter be handled calmly. By helping children develop the skills to deal with bullying behaviours, you're equipping them to deal with other incidents when they arise.

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First, emphasize that telling you about the bullying was the right thing to do. Children need to be reassured that parents are on their side and that they will do everything they can to help. Take steps to find out about both sides of the story.

If possible, try to identify why your child was bullied. If it was related to a negative behaviour, help him or her alter that behaviour. Remind her that teasing other people hurts them and they strike back because they are hurt. Teach children to say constructive things or to identify funny things without hurting people.

Other children may experience bullying because they are physically smaller, young, gentler or somehow weaker than other children. In some cases, giving your child the knowledge and skills to deal with aggression will help. Help your child understand that children who bully do so to gain power, but the power in the classroom belongs to the teacher, not to the child who bullies. The playground swing belongs to everybody, not to the bully. The ability to remove the sense of power may stop the bullying behaviour.

Approach the daycare or Kindergarten staff

If a bullying incident occurs, ask the daycare or Kindergarten staff about the incident. Confirm the facts. Ask for the educator's advice on how to deal with the situation. Follow up a few days later. Ensure that the staff members have been extra attentive to bullying behaviours, and that they have spoken with each other. If there has been a conflict between children, ask how it was resolved. Was there clarification about who is entitled to what? Was there an effort at reconciliation? Was there an apology? When it is clear to all that there has been a problem, insist on appropriate consequences—appropriated items are to be returned, all involved parents are to be notified and all injustices are to be settled. Ensure that staff and parents are helping the child who bullied learn more appropriate behaviour. This is essential, both to protect your child from future bullying and to get the other child on the right track.

Rebuild self-confidence

Find ways and reasons to tell children how much you love them. Find activities, such as music lessons or a soccer team, where he or she will probably enjoy. Ensure that the activities are properly supervised so that another opportunity for bullying does not arise.

Practise walking away

Explain that children who bully like seeing others cry or get upset. Come up with alternative responses to taunts. Practise walking away. Practise responses in front of a mirror until your child can look the other child in the eye and confidently tell that child that she does not like what's happening. Involve the adults in charge. Preschoolers should not be left to resolve bullying problems on their own. Adult guidance is essential.

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Build friendships

A child who experiences bullying often becomes withdrawn. Encourage your child to make friends, since children who bully others tend to focus on children who are alone. Invite one friendly child from the play group or daycare and his parent(s) to come over to your house.

CONCLUSION

Bullying hurts people of all ages, and your child can learn alternatives to bullying behaviour by learning how to resolve conflicts, respect others and handle frustration.

The decisions you make about aggression and communication will make a lifetime of difference to your child. Young children who bully grow into youth who bully and then into adults who are angry and have social and employment issues. Children and youth who bully others tend to have poor academic achievement, no friends and few relationship skills. None of us would wish that on children. No matter how difficult the choices you make now and no matter how much time and effort it takes to help your child learn more appropriate behaviour, be assured that it is time well spent.

If you prepare your child to enter school with the confidence and skills to make reasonable decisions, respect other people and solve conflicts peacefully, you are preparing your child to be a successful learner. Having already learned important lessons about people, he or she is now ready to learn about the rest of the world and contribute to a welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning community.

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