

Childhood Anger and Aggression

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Program Description

This lesson focuses on identifying the causes of anger and aggression in children, understanding what is normal and what is not and provides some strategies for parents to help their child learn non-violent ways to behave and react.

Program Objectives

1. Participants will learn where aggression originates.
2. Participants will learn ways to cope and teach social coping skills to children.
3. Participants will learn what aggression looks like at different ages.

Intended Audience

Parents. There are ways to adapt this lesson for parents of young children, parents of adolescents, and parents of teens.

Materials needed

- Overhead and projector
- Transparencies
- Easel paper and markers
- Post it notes and pencils
- Handouts

Introduction.....	05 minutes
Opening Activity	10 minutes
Mini Lecture.....	10 minutes
Group activity.....	20 minutes
Break	10 minutes
Strategies.....	20 minutes
Wrap-up and Evaluation....	10 minutes

Introduction

By any measure, the United States is an aggressive and often violent country. Violence is usually an outgrowth of anger and aggression. The task we have as parents is to assure that behaviors don't get to the violent stages! The big picture concerns we have that are reflected daily in the news involve: murder (the U.S. ranges from 9-10 persons per 100,000 people; US Census, 1994); domestic abuse (over 1200 children per year dying of abuse and or neglect; Weiss & Daro, 1995); and other signs that there is a stressed society (larceny, homicides, etc.).

The family is supposed to be the safe haven. The family is supposed to protect us. There is, however, some evidence that links family violence to street violence. There are many influences in society that tend to be linked to aggressive acts.

Can you name some of them? (Brainstorm)

- influence of peers, gun ownership
- ethnic misunderstanding, intra personal characteristics
- poverty, job stress

The family is the most important agent of learning and socialization too. So, how can we as parents help guide this generation of young people toward a world with less violence and where they can still protect themselves? Let's begin to focus on our children.

Opening Activity

Give each person a pad of post-it or sticky notes and a pencil or pen. Ask them to write down one characteristic per sheet and begin to post them. These are characteristics that they feel are words that describe signs that their child is angry or behaviors they have seen that worry them about their child's aggression. Begin to categorize these on a larger poster and group them to get an indication of their concerns about their children's behavior. Later you will see that some things are normal and others are worrisome. Some of the groupings may be physical, verbal, hurting others, family disruptions, etc.

How do children learn these behaviors?

Mini Lecture

Where does Aggression come from?

Is it that humans just have a fighting instinct? Is it that aggression is the outcome of frustration? Most recent studies view aggressive acts, not as the sole fault of the individual, but also related to a set of cultural and social circumstances.

What factors lead to aggression? (Refer to PowerPoint presentation, anger_and_aggression.ppt)

The Environment:

Some studies have found that the housing, school, neighborhood, and environment can contribute to aggression. For example, extreme heat and overcrowding have been shown to increase aggression. As well, sunshine and daylight tend to affect moods.

The Culture:

What sorts of models are children exposed to on television and in the community? When physical violence is used to solve problems then children learn that this is an appropriate behavior. Cultural mores are also a wonderful way to pass on tradition. *(Note: Be careful about TV violence or you will go way off track. Remind participants you can do a separate workshop to address and discuss that topic.)*

The Community:

Communities who understand and support children's rights are communities that support children and all their developmental stages. Places where there are healthy alternatives for recreation and supportive adults can protect children while they are learning to deal with many situations.

The Family:

The level of family stress and the positive and negative interactions of the family are components that influence children learning aggression. Children model the adults around them. They observe how others handle their anger and frustration and observe how they solve problems.

The Child:

A child's temperament and his/her learned coping skills are critical to being able to manage aggression. Statements such as "boys are supposed to act out their anger," or "she is wild" are common expressions in which parents and others may be referring to a child's temperament. Temperament is that part of the personality that seems to be controlled by genetics. There are basically three types- easy or flexible (60% of children), fearful and sensitive (25% of children), or feisty/difficult (15% of children). If a parent or teacher truly believes that an infant is "difficult," it may lead to greater power struggles in the early years as the child in turn fights for their portion of control.

Why are children aggressive?

Sometimes children do not have the social skills or self-control to manage their behavior. These must be modeled and taught. When children can't find the words to deal with aggressive feelings or are not encouraged to express themselves, they become frustrated. At other times, children cannot cope with growing levels of anger in themselves or in others. In both cases, children need to learn acceptable ways to assert themselves and to learn coping skills.

Activity:

Divide a mixed groups of parents (parents with various age children) into groups by the age of the child they wish to discuss (since they may have multiple children). If the group has just one age child, then just use that section.

Ask them to talk about their common angry or aggressive complaints for each age range. Write the complaints on the easel paper. Then follow their list with the comments included here.

What does aggression look like for different age children?

Instructor Comments:

Infants:

The most common complaint with infants is their crying or biting. Crying is how children talk. They let you know when they are happy (coo and babble) or need something (cry). We should find out what they need and provide it; whether it be a dry diaper, food, or warm touches.

The overuse of a "time-out" or a "thinking chair" can cause children to act more aggressively the next time. It may help to ask the child to rest from the activity that creates aggression. However, turning the incident into a punishment or control of force will only cause the child to think of ways to strike back. (see handout "timeout.pdf")

Toddlers:

In toddlers, the most aggressive acts occur over toys. To adults it looks like fighting, but to children it's learning how to get along. They have not learned how to say, "let's play." (see handout "biting.pdf" and "timeout.pdf"

Preschoolers:

With loving guidance, parents will see children from two-to five years of age decrease their physical aggression as they begin to use words to communicate needs. Knowing what to expect from normally developing children is critical.

What is typical behavior in young children?

Children are very complex. There are many behaviors that parents worry about that are simply typical. Knowing about these can be quite releasing and reassuring for parents so they don't feel their child is out of control when it may simply be a normal developmental stage. Here are some thoughts that help parents understand what is typical in young children:

- Young children are self-centered and have not developed all the brain connections to see another's point of view.
- Children see all or nothing. They do not understand that someone is not all good nor all bad.
- Children have a hard time thinking about the future or planning for it. They need concrete guides like picture lists to remember what to do and remember ways to act.
- Young children cannot sort out fantasy and reality and get mixed up as to what is real on TV.
- Children with difficult temperaments have difficulty reading the small cues other children send out in social situations. A 5-year-old may want to join another who is

building with blocks. The aggressive child misreads the child's attempt to join his play, views it as hostile intrusion rather than one child simply wanting to play with another. He may protect his territory by striking the uninvited child. Even when a teacher points out to the aggressive child the intentions of the other were not hostile, the aggressive child has difficulty understanding the situation for what it really is.

School-agers:

Between 1st to 3rd grade, most children lose the impulse and need to attack others aggressively. An aggressive child may strike a sibling, but seldom would they hit a friend at school or on the playground. Door slamming and foot stomping may occur at home, but most third graders have enough control to contain themselves at school.

There are some children who continue to act out aggressively between 4th and 9th grade. Boys display aggression in the form of direct confrontations and physical attacks. Although girls seldom display physical aggression in this same age range, they act out aggressively by shunning, ostracizing and defaming others.

Researchers have found that children who are most aggressive in 4th grade tend to continue to be aggressive there after. However, even older children can learn coping strategies and self-control.

Older children:

Even a child who seems to have grown out of his aggressive ways can be provoked when placed in an oppressive environment: poverty, social disorganization, crowding, neighborhood tensions or any threatening situation.

Children who have been handled harshly and inconsistently with little consideration, may have built up anger from lack of love and nurturing. This can lead to mean, hateful, hurtful and violent behavior in an attempt to strike back.

As children age, they move more toward taking their lead from peers. Peers, however, can reinforce the aggressor's actions. If peers also show aggression or do not correct aggressive acts, the aggressive behavior is encouraged. Many aggressive children have a network of aggressive friends. Although these clusters may encourage and strengthen antisocial behavior, they also appear to provide friendships and social support.

Even if parents hold off their child's aggressive behavior with firm but not harsh control, other things influence aggression. Neighborhoods, schools, and the media may provide aggressive environments where children witness aggression and violence in a variety of forms daily.

What can parents do?

For young children to grow out of their aggressive ways, they need positive, consistent, nurturing discipline. They need to learn positive problem solving techniques. Parents and teachers need to place children in environments that offer a setting and support for positive social behavior rather than aggressive hostile anti-social acts.

(Instructor note: You can use the chart on the following page by dividing it to use in a group activity, as a handout to go through, to read the suggestion and ask the group what age this would work with or some other creative way. You can use it for a handout to take home.)

Strategy	Pre-schoolers	School-agers	Teens
Use reasoning with children to explain things	x	x	x
Accept your child and understand his or her unique temperament. While his/ her behavior will be challenging at times, remain patient and supportive.	x	x	x
Tell your child how you expect him or her to behave. You will need to keep telling them. Be specific and positive. Rather than saying to your toddler, "Don't hit." Say, "Hitting hurts. Please use your words."	X		
Be consistent so children know what to expect.	x	x	x
Organize the environment, set limits on what the child can use in the home	x		
Limit access to aggressive toys (swords, toy guns)	x		
Monitor television for aggressive shows	x	x	x
Co-view television and comment on the content	x	x	x
Provide child with play things that give them some control in deciding among choices and roles like dress-up and puppets	x	x	
Sing songs, tell stories about feelings & frustrations. Talk about what anger may feel like.	x	x	
Allow some independence with materials like a help yourself to shelf activities, art supplies or puzzles area. Define where they can use these materials.	x	x	
Provide enough materials so children don't have to wait or become frustrated	x		
Allow enough transition time between activities, give a five-minute warning that activity will change or it is "time to come in from play."	x	x	x
Model controlled behavior and avoid angry outbursts and violence	x	x	x
Monitor out-of-home activity for older children. Know where they are and who they are with		x	x
Avoid extreme permissiveness, laxness and tolerance OR too much structure and demandingness	x	x	x
Figure out what the child needs-attention, security, control or to feel valued. Try to fill the need so they won't continue to act out in undesirable ways	x	x	x
Use closeness for control. When you sense your child about to lose control, quietly and gently move close.	x	x	

Often your calm presence is enough to settle your child			
Help children talk to each other to solve problems. Ask open-ended questions to help them think about options to solve their own problems.		x	x
Give children choices so they feel empowered. Pick two acceptable choices to offer.	x	x	x
Re-direct your child. If your child is pushing, hitting or grabbing, move him in another direction and another activity. Stay by his side until he's positively engaged.	x	x	
Remove an object. If your child is misusing a toy destroying it in an aggressive manner, remove it. Get out play dough, water play, or put your child in her sand box. These tactile experiences magically quiet aggression	x	x	
Remove your out-of-control child from the scene. Hold him, go for a walk, go to another room, stay with him/her until calm	x	x	
Be your child's control. If your child is hitting another, your words aren't enough to stop the aggression. You must move in and gently but firmly stop the behavior. You provide the control your child lacks. In time your control transfers to your child. Say, "I'll keep you from hitting your sister."	x		
Note improved behaviors..."I like the way you used words to solve that problem."	x	x	x
Avoid difficult situations. If you know going to the park where there are lots of kids, sends your child into an aggressive tirade, avoid going. Find a less stimulating setting where your youngster can meet with more social success.	x	x	x
Seek support yourself when you need a break.	x	x	x
Be right there. If you have a toddler and preschooler in your home, watch and guide their play to assure interaction stays non-aggressive.	x		
No punching bags. If you have a child who is aggressive, realize that the effect of "hit the punching bag, not Jacqueline," hasn't proven effective for reducing aggressive attacks.	x	x	x
Prepare the child. Before meeting new friends tell them how you expect them to behave. With young children, remind them that people don't like to be hit or pushed.	x	x	

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In extreme cases, try some of these options:

- Observe to get the facts, keep a log to find the theme of what triggers the acts of aggression then help child steer clear of these activities.
- Share notes or journal with parent or care giver. Compare to see if similar behaviors are triggered at home and school alike.
- Take a look at the environment. Is some activity or traffic path causing anxiety or frustration? Does the child feel crowded or made to sit too long? Does the child have enough personal space?
- For school-age children, write a plan of action for what the child will do when the negative behavior occurs.
- Make a list of activities to do "instead" (play dough, run around the house, vacuum, draw, take a bath, etc). Use a picture graph if the child is a non-reader.
- Recognize successes " Even though I could tell you were mad, that was a great way you controlled your anger!"
- Teach deep breathing and visualization relaxation exercises.
- During a time of calmness, talk with the child so they understand the consequences of actions. Bedtimes are often quiet times for talking.
- If all your strategies have been used, seek counseling or assistance to develop a child and family plan to learn aggression management.

Suggested Ending Activities:

Conduct a relaxation exercise with soft music and a visualization. Ask participants to close their eyes and you will tell them a story. They can do this with their children and teach their children this calming and coping strategy.

One version: You are walking down a path. It is fall but it is warm and very comfortable. There is a slight breeze. There are beautiful leaves on the trees all around. You begin to hear the birds chirping and calling. You hear the soft gentle rustle of the leaves. You find a large rock overlooking a valley. There is a slight bit of fog and you sit on the rock breathing in and out, in and out for as long as you want. PAUSE. When you decide to get up, you feel refreshed and ready to walk back on the path....open your eyes. How do you feel?

Summary

Behaviors are learned. When children are young, the foundation is set for the ways they will shape their personality and behaviors. Parents and care givers who use patient, consistent, firm, and loving guidance can learn to shape a child's ability to cope with their anger and aggression. Teach them strategies. They will not learn them unless you model them and teach them. They will need them in this world!

References:

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Harris, T. & J.D. Fuqua (2000). What does around comes around: Building a community of learners through circle time. *Young Children*, 55 (1) pp. 44-48.

Miller, K. (1996). *The Crisis Manual*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Parke, R.D. & Slaby, R.G. (1983). *The Development of Aggression*. In Paul H. Mussen *Handbook of Child Psychology Volume IV*.

Rubin, P.B. & J. Tregay. (1989). *Play with them: Therapy in groups in the classroom*. Springfield, IL. Charles C. Thomas.

Suggested Web sites that include topics related to anger and aggression:

The Preventive Ounce <http://www.preventiveoz.org/aboutemp.html>

See other related North Carolina Cooperative Extension publications:

Childhood Aggression Where does it come from? How can it be managed? FCS-504

Setting Limits for Young Children FCS-455 and FCS-456

<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/limits1.html>

<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/limits2.html>

Parenting Teens - FCS-422 (PDF)

<http://www.nccc.org/Parent/parent.teens.html>

Growing Together: Preschooler Development - FCS-454

<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/grow.preschool.html>

Helping Children Cope With Stress - FCS-457

<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cope.stress.html>

Growing Together: Infant Development -FCS-459

<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/grow.infant.html>

Childhood Years: Ages Six Through Twelve - FCS-465

http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/child6_12.html

Focus On Kids: The Effects Of Divorce On Children - FCS-471

<http://www.nccc.org/Child.Dev/effectsdivorce.html>

Videos - Reserve with the Media library by sending an e-mail to: medialib@ces.ncsu.edu.

Alternatives to Spanking (Satellite Program, 1997) - This is an excellent panel discussion about discipline alternatives. Using a portion of this tape would be appropriate for a group but not the whole tape. This would also be an excellent self-study for agents.

Child Management: Practical Parenting Series - video, 30 minutes, 1987; a behavioral approach to discipline including practical techniques such as consequences, consistency,

positive reinforcement, punishment, modeling, time out, and extinction; includes examples at all stages of development

Corporal Punishment:What To Do Instead - video, 30 minutes, 1990; gives alternatives to shaking, hitting and spanking and encourages parents to use more effective discipline strategies in their child rearing: shows parents dealing with common problems during infancy through schoolage; culturally sensitive and contemporary (excellent teaching guide)

Crying: What can I do? (Never Shake a Baby). (1994). 7 minutes. Crying is how babies talk. This short tape offers coping strategies for parents, grandparents, and baby sitters. The tape explains WHY we don't shake babies.

Shaking Hitting Spanking: What To Do Instead:(Learning Seed) copyright, 1995. 30 minutes video.

Television and Human Behavior: (Learning Seed) 26 minutes video, produced in 1991. It explores the effect of television on individual and society including topics such as addiction, violence, distortions, relationships.

Violence and Young Children: Reducing the Risks (Action Alliance for Children). 18 minutes video with guide. It is appropriate for viewing by concerned community advocates, policy makers, and care givers. In the context of both the video and this guide.

You Can Be a Better Parent in 30 Minutes: A Survival Kit for Parents of the 90's - video, 30 minutes, Family America Society, 1992; identifies 10 pressing problems facing parents and gives techniques to handle the problems: (1) child does not follow instructions, (2) parent yells at child, (3) inappropriate behavior in public, (4) poor school performance, (5) does not take "no" for an answer, (6) will not do chores, (7) parent's discipline causes more problems, (8) parents don't recognize good behavior, (9) parent expects too much from child, (10) parent compares child to other children.

additional information for instructor

SPARE THE ROD?

Pitzer, April 1991

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<http://www.cyfc.umn.edu/Documents/H/E/HE1010.html>

Many studies have established that most American parents spank their children, though many disapprove of the practice and doubt its effectiveness. Now a University of New Hampshire researcher who surveyed 186 parents in the New England states has more specific information about why this form of discipline is resorted to at all.

Barbara Carson found that 83 percent of these parents had spanked their children. Of that number, two out of five parents thought spanking was rarely, if ever, effective. One out of three felt guilty and blamed themselves after spanking a child. These findings contradict the traditional assumption that parents spank their children because they think it's an effective way of changing a child's behavior.

In Ms. Carson's study, parents reported that their own fatigue, frustration or bad mood often had more to do with whether a child got spanked than did the child's misbehavior.

Though Ms. Carson doesn't equate spanking with child abuse, she notes that both are likely to result from intense parental frustration, and both leave a guilty aftertaste. She believes that parents are likely to be less frustrated when they are knowledgeable about the predictable stages of child development. And she recommends that parents who feel guilty or uneasy about spanking expand their repertoire of disciplinary techniques to include time-outs -- for both parent and child -- and other nonphysical forms of discipline when a child misbehaves. MN Children Youth & Family Consortium Electronic Clearinghouse. Permission is granted to create and distribute copies of these documents for non-commercial purposes provided that the author and MN CYFCEC receive acknowledgment and this notice is included.

Phone: 612/626-9582; EMAIL: cyfcec@staff.tc.umn.edu.

For additional information contact Minnesota Extension Service.



Where Does Aggression Come From?

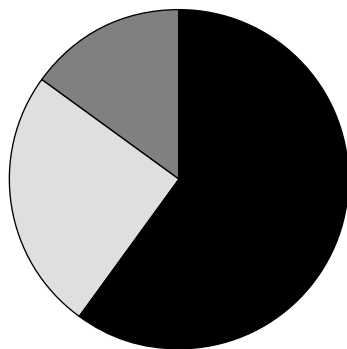
Environment

Culture

Community

Family

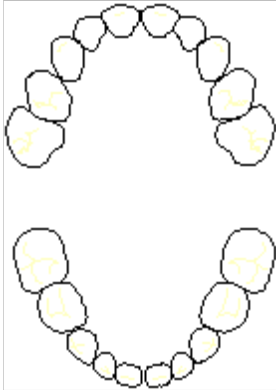
Child Temperament



Feisty/Difficult (15%)

Fearful and Sensitive (25%)

Easy or Flexible (60%)



Biting

Biting happens usually in children who are either teething or trying to show love.

Often babies want to show affection and kiss but they get so involved in what little they know about affection that they bite instead of kiss.

During teething

Be sure infants have firm surfaces on which to bite such as a soft toy, plastic ring, a clean washcloth or sock.

When biting occurs

Look at the child and firmly say "No biting! That hurts!" This shows you are not pleased.

If you can prevent the biting, gently steer the child away and say, "I will help you stop biting Jerome."

NEVER bite them back! Young children have not developed empathy and do not know how YOU feel. They don't know how to feel sorry yet. If you raise your voice because it hurt, they may cry simply because you were loud or had an angry face. But they didn't realize how you felt.



Time-out

A time-out is just that—a time out or cooling off period. When a child is misbehaving or out of control, he or she needs to be removed or isolated for a few minutes. Time-out can be used with children ages 3 to 12.

For young children, however, the time out period needs to be no longer than 5 minutes or they tend to forget the reason for the time out. A time-out gives a child a few minutes to settle down and think about what has happened.

Follow-up

Parents need to follow-up by talking with the child about the misbehavior. Young children do not always understand their misdoings. It helps to explain what happened, what they should not be doing, and what they can do instead.

They also need the opportunity to practice the correct behavior. Keep such discussions simple. You might say, "It's not OK to hit your sister. Instead, tell her with words that you want to play with the blocks, too."

Don't get yourself in the habit of saying "Time out!" at every turn or it will surely lose its effectiveness. It should be reserved for times when other strategies won't work. Some things to try first include talking to the child, redirecting the child into another activity, or simply giving the child the attention he/she wants through play or a shared activity. Time-out is a time to regroup and rejoin in an activity. Not a punishment chair!