

Angry  
Little  
Wots



# TIPS FOR HANDLING CHILD'S AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

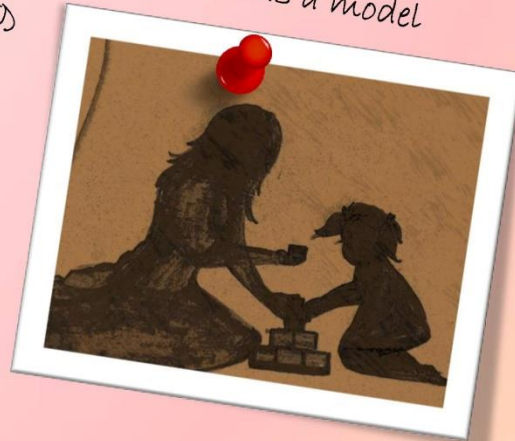
**Alternative ways to cope with anger**  
Find a relaxing activity



**Develop social emotional skills**  
Positive thinking



**Practicing self-control**  
Parent as a model



**Positive parent child interaction**  
Parent's physical presence



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## 1. What Is Aggression?

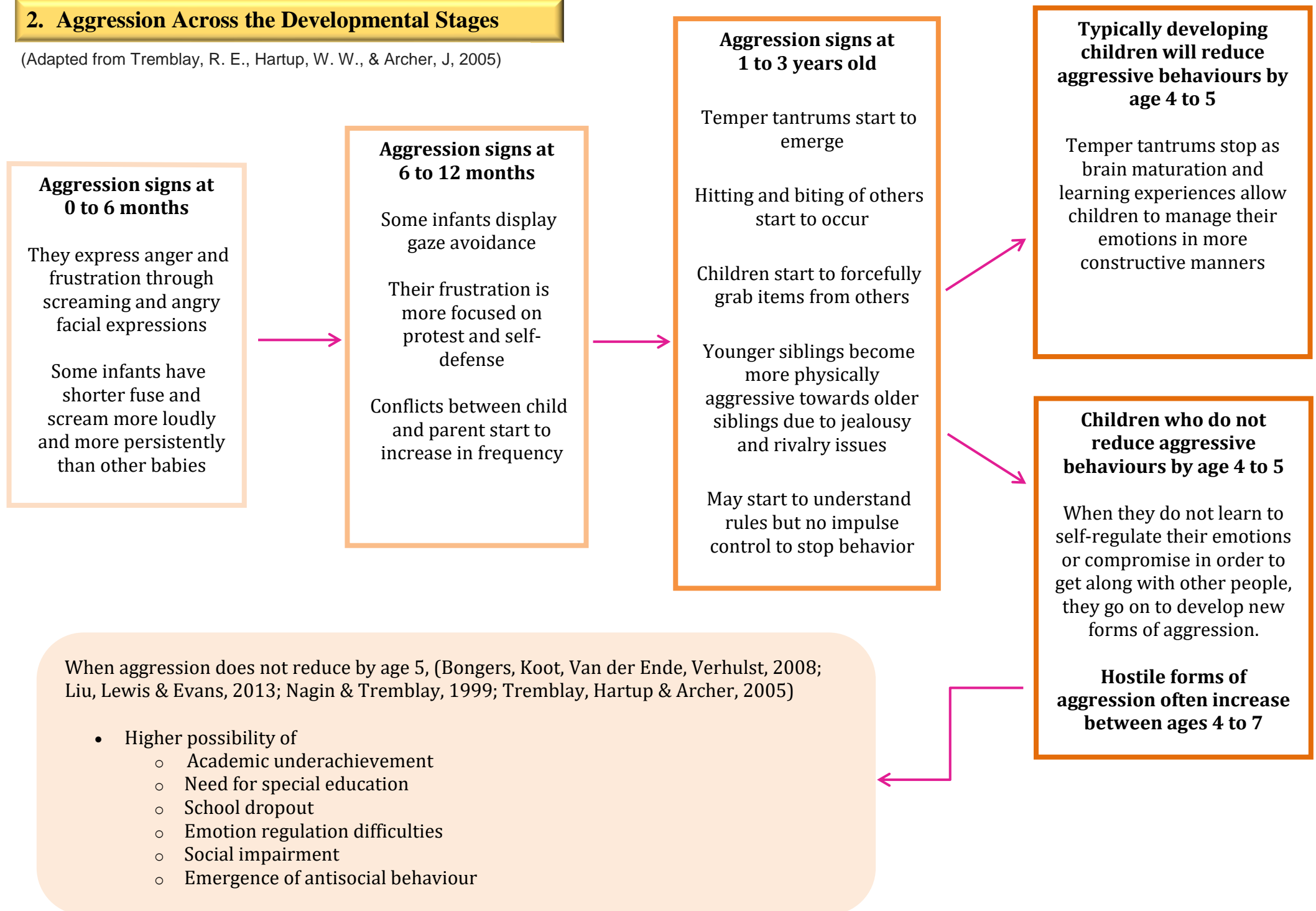
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**Aggression during infancy could be summed up as an “act directed towards a specific person, animal or an object” with intent to hurt or frighten (Shaw, 2006) or show displeasure.** This is usually acknowledged as a developmental path of progression universally with notable exceptions restricted to certain demographics such as the Pygmies of Africa. The earliest expression/onset could be observed through facial anger as early as 4 months in babies; this is in reaction to frustration (Lewis, Alessandri and Sullivan, 1990), before progressing to infantile aggression (pulling hair, screaming) and progressing to verbal aggression as they learn to talk. Aggression diminishes steadily as toddlers learn to calm themselves adequately (self-regulate) during the first 30 months. **Acculturation and social systems may determine or mitigate the levels of potential aggression expressed.**

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## 2. Aggression Across the Developmental Stages

(Adapted from Tremblay, R. E., Hartup, W. W., & Archer, J, 2005)



### 3. Why Is There Aggression In Children?

(Kanne & Mazurek, 2010)

#### Sources of Aggression

##### *Attachment*

- Interactions & attachment styles
- Parents' ability to Observe & Reflect on their child's abilities, identity & perspectives
- Parents' hostility & temperament

##### *Family Dynamics*

- Exposure to conflict between family members
- History of mental health issues
- Lack of suitable role models
- Physically/emotionally victimised

##### *Environmental*

- Prenatal exposure to tobacco and alcohol
- Media exposure to violence and aggression
- Lack of exposure to learn self-control through age appropriate play

##### *Biological*

- Lack of Neuro-developmental components for emotional regulation (e.g. impulse control)
- Inadequate cognitive emotional, motor, sensory and social experiences to target such components

#### 4. Example Of A Situation Between A Parent And An Aggressive Child

Imagine yourself as a parent in this scenario with your aggressive child:

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"You're standing in the snack aisle of the supermarket. Your child starts to pick everything from chocolates to potato chips. As you tell your child that it is not healthy to have them, your child starts screaming at you. Your child starts to lie on the floor of the supermarket and your child's face has turned to a shade somewhere between red and purple. Your child's fists are pounding on the floor in fury as your child emits a shriek that can be heard in the farthest ends of the supermarket. The other shoppers are gaping at this spectacle and shaking their heads in disbelief. You attempt to pull your child up and start yelling at your child but it only makes your child scream even louder and your child starts to hit and push you. You're wishing desperately for a hole to open in the floor and swallow you up"

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## 5. Tips for handling Aggressive Children

### a. Increasing Positive Parent-Child Interaction

Why the need for positive interaction?

*Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) found that high levels of positive parenting reduced the associations between harsh physical discipline and child exhibiting externalising behavior. Harsh and inconsistent discipline such as excessive scolding and corporal punishment has also been shown to increase aggressive behaviors (Gershoff, 2002).*

#### i. Give comfort and affection

As a parent, you can always let your child know that you care about his/her feelings. Your physical presence and even the gesture of a hug can be comforting to your child to let them know that you still love and care for them. While consequences and firm boundaries are needed to be set for undesired aggression, children must always be reminded that they are loved.





## ii. Do not use excessive physical punishment as a form of discipline

Children may begin to believe that the way to handle others is through aggressive means which may then reinforce aggressive behaviour. While physical punishment may contain the child's behavior at times, in the long run it may result in the child having difficulties in adjusting to novel situations. Communicating firm boundaries and rules with consequences for behaviour with my child are better for instilling discipline. Consequences such as withholding privileges' (e.g. no television, no access to internet) are forms of consequences that are better alternatives to using physical punishment with my child.

## **b. Developing a Child's Social-Emotional Skills**

Why the need for social-emotional skills?

*Social emotional capacity starts developing from birth (social referencing and social instrumental signals, such as fake crying in order to get attention) but emerges more apparently around 22 months (Saarni, 2000). Developing emotional capacity ensures that the infant/ child develops necessary components of positive social behaviors (dependent on their cognitive and language ability).*

*When a toddler starts experiencing a novel situation, they may start exhibiting behaviours that might represent mimicking as if they were going through the act and may become distressed in the process. However, as they develop higher cognitive ability and a more sophisticated way of thinking the toddler will learn strategies to comfort oneself or help others around them.*

### **i. Reflecting on behaviour and emotions with my child**

Helping to identify and discuss emotions with my child can help him/her understand his/her own and others' feelings. I can find other opportunities; to teach the concept of emotions and respective behaviours associated with it. For example, when playing with stuffed animals which are engaged in pretend fight, you could say, "They must be angry because they're both fighting for that crumb of bread to eat." Reading stories provides a great opportunity to discuss the connection between emotions and behaviour. Even when your child is highly aroused, it is essential to empathise with the child, and allow him/her to communicate his thoughts on how he/she feels (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997; Archer & Parke, 1994; Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon & Cohen, 2009).

For example:

*"I know you are unhappy that I didn't let you take the potato chips. Mummy/daddy will wait here with you until you are ready to talk to us about it"*

*"I think you must be very upset about your snacks. What is it about the snacks that makes you upset?"*



## **ii. Teaching them problem solving skills**

When guiding my child through a conflict, I encourage them to come up with solutions. As I cannot be around my child all the time, this teaches them to be more independent, while also encouraging critical thinking. One way to teach my child reasoning and problem solving tactics is by doing a 'think-aloud' when they encounter a problem. Modeling can help my child learn how to apply problem-solving skills and thought processes to their own experiences. These are the problem solving steps:

1. What are you feeling? (Knowing their feelings and labeling them can help them feel more in control, e.g. *"I am angry"*)
2. What is the problem? (Encourage your child to identify a specific problem, e.g. *"I am not allowed to get all the snacks I want"*)
3. What solutions are there? (Guide your child to come up with any solutions they can think of, e.g. *"scream and cry, negotiate with mum, take only one"*)
4. What if you tried the solutions? (Encourage your child to think about what kind of outcomes each solution might have, how others might react to them and whether it is fair or not, e.g. *"screaming and crying would not work because it will make mummy upset and they might end up getting no treats at all". "Negotiating and telling mummy that they would not eat all the snacks at once might work."*)
5. Which solution to try? (Allow your child to try one or more of the solutions they came up with. If any of them do not work, go through with them why and move on to the next, e.g. *"I cried and mummy kept back all the snacks, so let me try asking for one of it nicely"*)<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ecmhc.org/tutorials/social-emotional/mod4\\_3.html](https://www.ecmhc.org/tutorials/social-emotional/mod4_3.html)  
<https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/how-teach-problem-solving-strategies-kids-guide>

## **c. Teaching Alternative Ways To Deal With Anger**

Why alternative ways?

*Children's progression and recovery from anger were associated with their ability to distract themselves. At all ages, quicker, longer distractions were associated with briefer displays of anger. The self-initiation of shifting attention away from whatever situation or object they were fixated on, involves effortful control of their own attention, which is viewed as central to self-regulation of emotions (Cole et al., 2011).*

### **i. Practice socially accepted responses when frustrated**

Whenever possible, build in chances where our children can practice alternative behaviours that are more socially appropriate.

*Example:* John likes to pull people's hair when he cannot get access to what he wants (such as preferred toy cars or favourite food). To help him practice more socially appropriate behaviour (such as sharing, requesting or turn taking); add in possible times within the day for practice. For instance, during snack time, John can be shown how to request for his snack when otherwise would have been given to him. This will help to him understand that there are alternative and more efficient ways to indicate his intentions (other than pulling other people's hair).

## ii. Help your child find new and creative ways to deal with anger

Encourage your child to use words to express their feelings rather than using physical aggressiveness. Talking through the issue can help some children work through the anger and calm down. If your child doesn't want to discuss it with you, she may feel comfortable "talking" to a pet, puppet, or imaginary friend. Allowing them to find ways to move away from aggressive tendencies through other forms of outlets may also be helpful for children who may have developmental delays in which they are unable to express themselves verbally. A great way to help children refocus their thoughts away from anger is to give them creative outlets to let out steam. Some children may stomp their feet or punch a pillow to let out their anger. Drawing, dancing or even taking the dog for a walk is useful in giving children alternative ways to let off their anger.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/discipline/anger-management/6-ways-to-curb-your-childs-aggressive-behavior/>

## **d. Practicing Self-Control With Your Child**

Why self-control?

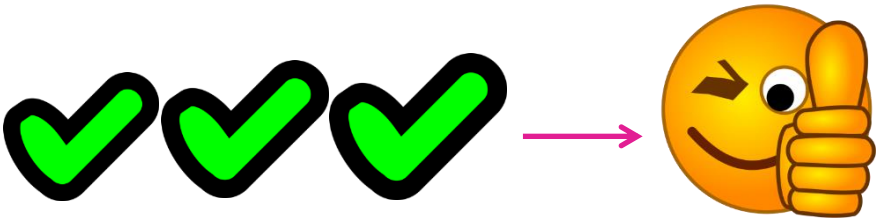
*Self-control provides the capacity to manage expressions of emotion, particularly negative emotions which develops during the early years of a child's life and has particular significance towards the development of appropriate and adaptive social behaviors (Fox & Calkins, 2003). As children grow older, at around the ages of 4 to 5, they start to see the differences between short-term and long-term consequences. Children start to compare and weigh the cost and benefits of an action and realize that a long-term outcome is greater and they may choose to delay gratification to their best ability.*

### **i. Modelling self-control as a parent**

Children love to mimic adults and model their behaviour (Zimmerman, 2005) be it the way we dress, talk and even express our anger. When a parent screams during a disagreement or conflict, their child learns by watching the behaviour. Shouting at an angry child only reinforces what they are feeling and deprives them of the opportunity to learn self-regulation. When your child throws a tantrum by lying on the floor, you should maintain a calm composure. By approaching your child in a calm manner, you would be helping your child feel safe and self-regulate.

## ii. Practicing self-control through a reward system

Kids need rewarding opportunities to practice self-control. A token economy system can be a fun way to do this. Make rules beforehand to establish the requirements for the reward. Reward your child's good behavior with tokens. Then, allow him to exchange tokens for bigger rewards, like a trip to the zoo. For instance when an aggressive behaviour occurs, remind them of the reward system. This teaches the kid to resist impulsive temptations (e.g. flooring to get she/he wants), and to control and self-monitor their behaviours, in order to achieve the reward.





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