

Top Tips for Managing Aggression

Set a Keep Your Hands + Feet to Yourself Rule

Sit down and explain that there is now a keep your hands and feet to yourself rule. Use toys and storybooks to demonstrate the difference between keeping your hands and feet to yourself and aggression.

Make a Behaviour Chart

Make a behaviour chart and say “see this chart – we’re going to use it to help us practice keeping our hands and feet to ourselves. When you keep your hands and feet to yourself you’ll earn a special sticker for your chart. If you earn # stickers you will get to pick a special reward off your special reward list”

Decide On a Sticker Schedule

This will depend on how frequently the aggressive behaviour is occurring. If your toddler is hitting/biting/etc. a few times each hour, award stickers every 30-minutes initially. If aggressive behaviour is much less frequent, award 1 sticker daily.

Decide On a Reward Schedule

It’s important that your child experiences success so start by make non-sticker rewards contingent on a small number of stickers. Your child should be able to earn a reward within 48-hrs. As your toddler is successful, gradually increase the number of stickers they need to earn a reward, but be careful not to phase rewards out too quickly.

Choose Rewards

Rewards are only effective if they’re meaningful so get your child’s input regarding the rewards they’d like to earn. On a piece of paper list or draw 5-10 rewards that your toddler can chose from. Rewards that can be given shortly after the correct number of stickers has been earned are most effective. Make sure you follow through with rewards or your toddler will lose interest.

Introduce Consequences

Start with a rewards-based behaviour chart. If after 7-14 days you see no improvement in your child’s aggressive behaviour, introduce consequences. Explain to your toddler how consequences work and role play what will happen if your toddler is aggressive. Consequences might include: removing a favourite toy for a few hours, stopping an activity, or time-out. Consequences must occur immediately after aggressive behaviour.

Be Consistent

Watch your child’s behaviour closely and make sure you reward positive behaviour and follow through with consequences each and every time aggressive behaviour occurs.

Aggressive Behaviour

Toddlerhood is a time of rapid growth and development. As toddlers develop new skills they are eager to assert themselves, communicate their likes and dislikes, and function independently.

At the same time, toddlers are limited by their developing skills including skills for self-control and skills for communicating with words and this can be a source of frustration for them.

Until their emotion regulation skills are better developed, toddlers express their frustration through:

- Tantrums
- Acts of control (refusing to comply)
- Aggressive behaviour

There is wide variation in terms of aggressive behaviour in toddlers. Some toddlers are strong reactors and when in a frustrating situation, have highly aggressive responses, other kids have more mild reactions.

There are two important components to managing aggression in toddlers:

- Behaviour management
- Skills development

This tips sheet covers tips for behaviour management with aggressive behaviour. See our website for tips for helping kids to build skills for tolerating frustration.

If your difficulties persist speak to your GP about a referral to a child clinical psychologist.