

# Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers

## Get Started Before It's Too Late! Give Them an Advantage in School... and Life!

by Dr. Charles Fay

What's the "bottom line" about chronically aggressive toddlers and preschoolers? Without powerfully effective intervention...before they enter kindergarten...the odds are very high that they will experience repeated failure in school and face a life filled with frustration and disappointments. The odds are also very high that they will inflict a great deal of emotional and physical pain upon others. These are strong words for a serious issue. Let's not beat around the bush and pretend that little tykes who chronically punch, kick, bite, or display any other aggressive behavior will simply grow out of it. Time is of critical importance here! Listed below are three important facts agreed upon by experts on this issue (for example, see Campell & Ewing, 1990; Offord & Bennett, 1994; Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995.):

- Potentially long-term aggressive behavior can very accurately be identified in children as young as age three or four.
- This antisocial behavior will very likely continue well into adulthood if intervention has not stopped it by the end of the third grade.
- Early intervention in homes, schools, and communities is the critical key to preventing aggressive toddlers and preschoolers from becoming violent teens and adults.

Despite these frightening facts, there's good news! Based on the wonderful research conducted over the past quarter century, we now have an excellent understanding of how to prevent early aggressive behavior from becoming a lifelong pattern. The remainder of this article is devoted to taking a closer look at the essential components of effective early intervention. What can we do on a daily basis to help young children adopt peaceful...rather than painful...behavior?

### **Begin intervention as early in the child's life as possible.**

Time can be our biggest ally...or our biggest enemy. If we begin intervention very early, the odds are quite high that we'll be successful. In contrast, research shows that if a child is still chronically aggressive at age nine or ten the odds of successful intervention are extremely low (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995). Don't waste time thinking that any aggressive child will simply "grow out of it."

### **Limit exposure to television and videos.**

Do I really need to say much here? Do we already know from decades of research...and common sense...that little ones copy what they see? Can we really ignore the negative effects of children viewing unhealthy behavior on television or in videos? (For research on the topic, see NIMH, 1982; Liebert & Sprefkin, 1988; Huston et. al., 1992.)

Unfortunately, common sense just isn't as common as it once seemed to be.

And don't be fooled by movie ratings or the fact that a television show airs on Saturday morning! There's no substitute for previewing any videos or TV shows your young children might see.

There's another issue here: During the time when it is critical that young children are actively learning about their worlds through movement and play, does it make sense that they are spending time sitting passively in front of a screen? Is there any way that young children can learn the complex social, behavioral, and cognitive skills essential for success in school by sitting like zombies in front of the television? No way!

*The more television a child watches, the more problems he or she will eventually have in school.  
It's just that simple.*

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## Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers, continued.

### Practice alternatives to spanking.

I've met many naturally great parents, with very nice children, who believe that spanking really works. These parents swear by it, and their kids seem to be living proof that a whack on the bottom magically imparts responsible behavior.

A closer look at these good families tells the real tale. While the parents think spanking is responsible for their success, what has really created such nice kids is all of the loving limits, guidance, and effective techniques they are using. When I ask how often they actually have to spank their children, these parents usually have a very difficult time remembering the last time. The real truth of the matter is that their kids are good kids because they are good and loving parents...not because they consider spanking a good technique.

The wisest and most sophisticated parents understand that little tykes copy the behavior of the "big" people around them. If a child has already shown signs of aggression, does it make any sense, whatsoever, to teach them a new battlefield technique by administering a hand to their butt? One smart mother commented, "It doesn't make a lick of sense to spank a kid when that kid has already made a habit of 'spanking' others."

Smart parents also realize that their children will someday be in charge of selecting their nursing homes.

Researchers have observed that, in general, young children who are spanked display far more aggressive behavior than those who aren't (see for example Sears, Maccoby, & Levin 1957; Strassberg, Dodge, Petit, & Bates, 1994; Straus, Sugarman & Giles-Sims, 1997). Can we truly ignore all of this research?

Less sophisticated and less wise parents ignore all of these facts and attempt to argue that spanking teaches kids a good lesson. These are often the parents whose children are hanging on by an emotional thread. How sad.

### Consistently apply empathy and logical consequences for aggressive behavior.

If there's scientific proof that spanking and other forms of corporal punishment backfire in the long term, what can we do instead? With very young chil-

dren there are two Love and Logic strategies that clearly apply here: (1) The "Uh Oh Song"; and (2) The "Energy Drain."

When a young child is behaving aggressively, one option is to sing "Uh oh" and place the child gently in his or her room, a playpen, or someplace else where we know the child will be safe and will not be able to trick us into giving them more attention while they are misbehaving. Without yelling or threatening, we remove the child from the scene of the crime.

The key to success with the "Uh Oh Song" is to give the child little or no attention...positive or negative...while they are being removed or while they are serving time.

*The fewer words we use while the child is misbehaving, the more effective we will be.*

Another key to success is to make certain that the child is calm before they are allowed to return.

Before experimenting with the "Uh Oh Song," be sure to review the step-by-step instructions on pages 71-76 of our book, *Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood*.

Parents who consistently apply the "Uh Oh Song" rave about how it has changed their lives for the better. Teachers who slightly modify it for use in their early childhood classrooms do the same.

By four years of age, most kids are ready for the "Energy Drain" approach, which is described on pages 107-108 of the book mentioned above. A foster mother wrote us and described how she used this with a young boy, Roger, who had turned fighting with his siblings into an art form. Every time Roger hit, she'd inform him, with sincere sadness in her voice, that he had drained her energy. Sadly for Roger, the only way energy could be replaced was to do extra chores for his unhappy, drained mother.

Not long after Mom discovered Love and Logic, Roger was asked by his therapist, "How's the fighting going?"

Displaying his disgust by rolling his eyeballs back in their sockets, Roger replied, "Don't do it no more. It drains Mom's energy. I'm sick and tired of putting energy back into her!"

## Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers, continued.

From that day on, Roger waged far fewer battles, and his foster mom had far more energy!

### Neutralize arguments and power struggles.

Research on adult-child interaction patterns shows that children who are able to suck their parents and teachers into power struggles and arguments are significantly more likely to develop severely noncompliant...and aggressive...behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984).

Fortunately, Love and Logic offers a powerful skill for putting an end to damaging arguments and power struggles!

What's the first step? Go brain dead. That's right. Do not think about what an arguing child is saying. If we think too hard, might it be too difficult for us to refrain from falling into the unfortunate trap of lecturing, threatening, arguing, or getting so worn out that we back down? The less we think about what the child is saying, the calmer we will stay.

The second and final step involves repeating just one simple phrase, over and over again, in a calm, empathetic way. My very favorite "argument-ender" is the following:

*I love you too much to argue.*

Parents and teachers who master the skill of becoming a loving "broken record" when kids argue are parents and teachers whose children are a lot more fun to be around!

### Teach social skills and problem solving on a daily basis.

Over years of observing and interviewing hundreds of very successful teachers and parents of special needs children, I've noticed that they all seem to say the same thing:

I can't assume that this child knows how to behave until I have repeatedly taught them and shown them how to behave. I also can't assume that they will learn it and remember it after I've taught it just once, twice, three times, or more. They will eventually learn how to behave only if I teach them just a small amount at

a time and review it over and over again each and every day.

Successful parents and teachers identify specific behaviors they want kids to perform, and they repeatedly model and teach these behaviors, such as:

- How to share
- How to stand in line without touching others
- How to say "please" and "thank you"
- What it looks like to be helpful
- How to comfort someone who is upset
- How to listen
- How to tell others how you feel instead of acting out your feelings by hitting, pushing, etc.
- How to compromise
- How to comfort yourself when you don't get your way

Young children learn through play. Great parents and teachers of young children teach through play. In the following example, Dad teaches three-year-old Ethan a fun lesson in problem solving:

Dad: (Holding Fred, the stuffed skunk) Uh oh, Fred has a big problem!

Ethan: What?

Dad: His friends are calling him names. They say he smells like a skunk.

Ethan: He IS a skunk!

Dad: Yeah. But it hurts his feelings. What do you think he should do?

Ethan: Maybe bite their noses!

Dad: Oh no. What would happen if he did that?

Ethan: He'd get in big trouble...have to go to his room.

Dad: Yeah. How sad. And then he wouldn't be able to play anymore. What else could he do?

Ethan: Don't know.

Dad: What if he was just silly and said, "I know.

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## Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers, continued.

I'm very, very smelly. Woooo Weeee!" and played with the other kids anyway?

Ethan: Good! Silly!  
And so on...

### **Systematically attend to positive behavior.**

How often does the following vicious cycle develop in the lives of aggressive toddlers?

1. The child hits, kicks, bites, or does something else hurtful.
2. A well-meaning adult quickly gives the aggressive child far too much attention in the form of warnings, lectures, or "punishments."
3. Subconsciously, the child learns that they receive the lion's share of the attention every child craves (albeit negative attention) when they are behaving poorly.
4. The child acts out more frequently to get this attention.
5. Well-meaning adults quickly give the child even more attention when he/she acts aggressively.
6. The cycle repeats itself over and over again, intensifying with each repetition.

The key to breaking this dangerous cycle involves paying close attention to the child and systematically "noticing" when they are performing the behaviors we want. More specifically, this aggression "antidote" involves the follow sequence of actions:

1. When the child is behaving, move over to the child, kneel down, and smile.
2. Look into their bright little eyes.
3. Give them a gentle pat on the back, a "high five," or a hug.
4. Describe the positive behavior you just witnessed, using the format, "I noticed..."

Far too frequently, we heap far too much nonspecific praise upon children. The more specific and precise

our description of the behavior, the more successful we will be. For example, "I noticed that you shared the red truck with Jamie" will surely yield more favorable results than, "I noticed you are being so nice and sweet." In my presentations, I often give this tip:

*Notice and specifically describe...  
rather than praise.*

### **Consult with qualified medical and mental health professionals.**

Listed below are just a few possible causes of aggressive behavior in young children:

- Poor parenting
- Trauma in the form of abuse or neglect
- Brain damage due to closed-head injury, lack of oxygen during the birth process, prenatal exposure to drugs, alcohol, or other toxins, etc.
- Genetic abnormalities
- Other health problems
- Marital problems resulting in family instability
- Observation of aggressive peers

The list goes on.

Wise parents don't hesitate to consult with qualified medical and mental health professionals in order to rule out as many potential causes for the aggression as possible and treat the ones that seem to be playing a role in the problem.

### **Apply multiple effective interventions simultaneously.**

The research is clear. The more helpful things we do to address the problem...and do at the same time...the greater the chances of success (Henry, 1987; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997).

For example, an ineffective plan for Amy, a very aggressive youngster, might involve simply delivering a logical consequence each time she acts out.

An effective plan would involve not only delivering a logical consequence each time Amy acted aggressively, but also many other components, including

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## Helping Aggressive Toddlers and Preschoolers, continued.

limiting her exposure to TV and videos, modeling and teaching social skills, systematically attending to her positive behavior, adding family therapy, making sure that the home and daycare are “on the same page,” etc.

There’s great hope for little tykes who’ve fallen into the habit of terrorizing their homes and classrooms. That is, as long as the caring adults around them take immediate and decisive action. Please don’t fall into the trap of thinking that a chronically disruptive, aggressive toddler will grow out of it. The world can’t afford another violent teenager!

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