

Supporting young children who hit or hurt others

A guide for early years providers



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Understanding why children hit or hurt others

Children may hit, push or hurt others for various reasons, often linked to their developmental stage, emotional regulation or environmental influences.

Common reasons include:

- **Limited verbal skills**
Young children may struggle to express themselves with words.
- **Emotional overwhelm**
Feelings of frustration, anger or excitement can result in physical reactions.
- **Seeking attention**
Some children use physical actions to gain attention when other methods are ineffective.
- **Sensory needs**
Some children seek sensory feedback through physical movement.
- **Mimicking behaviour**
Children may copy aggressive behaviours they have witnessed at home, in media or from peers.



The importance of a calm response

Rather than reacting with anger, adults should respond with curiosity, looking beneath the behaviour to understand what the child is trying to express. When adults react with frustration or anger, it reinforces the child's distress and can escalate the behaviour. Instead, responding with calmness and emotional containment demonstrates an alternative way of managing big feelings. This models self-regulation and helps the child feel safe.

The role of co-regulation

Young children need repeated experiences of co-regulation before they can develop the ability to regulate themselves. Co-regulation is when a supportive adult helps a child manage their emotions by providing a calm, reassuring presence. This can be through soothing touch, gentle tone of voice, empathetic validation and consistent emotional availability. When children experience co-regulation regularly, they begin to internalise these skills and build their own self-regulation capacity over time.

Four strategies to use in the moment when a child hits or hurts others

1

Separate the behaviour from the child

Show unconditional positive regard by making it clear that while the behaviour is not acceptable, the child is still valued and supported. For example, say, “I care about you, but I can’t let you hit. Let’s find another way to express how you feel.”

2

Remain emotionally available

Stay close and provide a calm, reassuring presence when a child is struggling. When we meet dysregulation with our own frustration or agitation, we reinforce that emotional escalation is an acceptable response. Instead, remain calm and regulated, demonstrating alternative ways to manage emotions.

3

Validate emotions, not actions

Acknowledge the child’s feelings while setting firm boundaries about safe behaviour.

4

Model self-regulation

Show children how to calm themselves by taking deep breaths or using grounding techniques.

Five activities to help children learn alternative coping strategies

These activities support the child in developing self-regulation skills and finding healthier ways to express needs.

1 Stomp and shake

Encourage children to release frustration through safe physical movements like stomping feet or shaking their hands.

2 Squeeze and release

Give the child a soft toy or ball to squeeze and then slowly release, helping them physically process big emotions.

3 Feelings check-in board

Offer opportunities for children to share how they are feeling and receive guidance on managing emotions.

4 Gentle touch practice

Introduce activities where children learn to use gentle hands, such as petting a soft toy or giving high-fives.

5 'I need' board

Create a visual board with pictures of different needs (e.g., water, space, hug, toy) that children can point to when they struggle to verbalise their emotions or requests. Practise using this throughout the day.

Hitting or hurting others is a behaviour that many young children display as they learn to regulate their emotions and communicate their needs. By taking a relational approach, adults can guide children towards alternative, safer ways of expressing themselves. Remaining calm, responding with curiosity, modelling self-regulation and providing opportunities for co-regulation all help children develop crucial skills for managing emotions and interactions.

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