

Understanding & Addressing Hitting in Young Children



Why Do Children Hit?



Immature Impulse Control

The prefrontal cortex, responsible for self-regulation, is still developing – especially under age five.



Cause & Effect Exploration

Young children experiment with their environment and may hit simply to observe reactions.



Modeled Behavior

Children may mimic hitting if they've observed it in others or experienced physical discipline.

Emotional Triggers



Frustration or Anger

When children lack the words to express themselves, they may use their bodies to communicate.



Overstimulation

Crowded, noisy, or chaotic environments can overwhelm a child and lead to hitting.



Attention-Seeking

Sometimes hitting is a way to elicit attention – even if that attention is negative.



Fatigue & Hunger

Unmet physical needs like tiredness or hunger can lower a child's threshold for frustration and impulse control.



Difficult Transitions

Changes in routine or activity can trigger strong emotional reactions that a child cannot yet verbalize.

Conscious Parenting Solutions



Prevention Strategies

Observe and anticipate triggers. Teach emotional vocabulary using simple phrases and emotion charts. Offer safe physical outlets like pounding playdough or squeezing a stress ball.



Immediate Responses

Stay calm and validate feelings without condoning behavior. Redirect toward better choices: "If you're angry, you can say, 'I don't like that.'"



Teaching Alternative Skills

Role-play scenarios, use visual cues for "stop" or "gentle hands," and teach breathing exercises to help your child calm their body.



Strengthen Emotional Connection

Focus on quality time through reading or play. Acknowledge positive behavior: "You asked for the toy so nicely!" Reinforce connection through gentle touch.



Manage Your Own Reactions

Pause before responding. Model self-regulation by saying aloud: "I'm feeling upset, so I'm going to take a deep breath."

What to Avoid & When to Seek Help



Avoid Physical Punishment

Hitting back or using physical discipline teaches children that hitting is an acceptable way to resolve problems.



Avoid Shaming

Statements like "You're a bad child for hitting" damage self-esteem and do not teach any alternative behavior.



Persists Beyond Age Five

If hitting continues past age five, consider seeking professional guidance to understand underlying causes.



Frequent & Severe Episodes

Seek help if the hitting becomes increasingly frequent or severe in intensity.



Other Concerning Behaviors

Seek professional support if your child also struggles with withdrawal, extreme anger, or other developmental concerns.

References

- References: American Academy of Pediatrics, Zero to Three, Siegel & Bryson, Gottman et al., and the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis.