

MANAGING AGGRESSION AT HOME

DID YOU KNOW?

According to developmental theory, aggressive impulses or drives are born in the human child and are a crucial aspect of the psychological life-force and of survival. In the course of healthy development, these drives are normally expressed in various behaviours at different ages and, with assistance from parents and others, are gradually brought under the control of the individual—moderated, channeled, and regulated.

Children can become aggressive because they are frustrated by a problem or situation that is too big for them to resolve.

It is not uncommon for children who have trouble handling their emotions to lose control and direct their distress at a caregiver, screaming and cursing, throwing dangerous objects, or hitting and biting. It can be a scary, stressful experience for you and your child.

It's helpful to first understand that behaviour is a form of communication. A child who is so overwhelmed that they are lashing out is often a distressed child who has not yet learned the skills to manage their emotions and behaviours to resolve conflict in a safe manner. This may be because they lack language, impulse control, or problem-solving abilities.

WHEN MANAGING ACTIVE AGGRESSION, IT'S IMPORTANT TO:

- **Maintain everyone's safety.**

This may include modifying and/or removing people or aspects of the environment that appear to be contributing to the conflict.

- **Stay calm.**

When faced with an overwhelmed child, it's easy to feel out of control and find yourself yelling at them. But when you shout, you have less chance of reaching them. Instead, you will only be making them more overwhelmed. As hard as it may be, if you can stay calm and in control of your own emotions, you can be a model for your child and teach him to do the same thing.

- **Give your child the space they need to work through their heightened emotional and behavioural states.**

When children become aggressive, they often have difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviour which impairs their decision-making. This is because their brains are still developing and can become more easily overloaded. It's important to give children the time and space they need to self-regulate and calm down. Children are more likely to respond and engage positively when you try to reason and empathise with them at a time that they are more relaxed and calm.

- **Be a coach and encourage appropriate means of communication.**

When time permits, encourage your child to communicate what they were angry about and discuss ways that they could have better managed the situation. Be wary of your tone when communicating with your child and if possible, encourage them to resolve the problem. Help them brainstorm ways that they overcome the same problem more effectively in the future.



PRACTICAL TIPS TO PREVENT & HELP REGULATE AGGRESSION:



Encourage your child to participate in regular physical activity. Research suggests that children who engage in regular physical exercise are less likely to exhibit challenging behaviours and aggression.



Maintain good sleep hygiene. A large body of research supports the connection between sleep deprivation and mood changes such as increased anger and aggression. Individuals who get an adequate amount of sleep each night exhibit fewer emotional outbursts, such as anger, and display fewer aggressive behaviours.



Maintaining routine can help reduce sudden feelings of confusion, overwhelm and anger which can underlie aggressive behaviour. If changes in routine occur, take the time to inform your child so that they have the time and space to process, regulate and adapt to the change.



At times, children have difficulty expressing their emotions. Having visual supports such as an emotional thermometer can assist identifying their emotions and their intensity. By identifying emotions and their intensity, you can tailor your approach and how you engage with your child. See an example emotion thermometer below.

UNHELPFUL STRATEGIES TO MANAGE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

AVOID encouraging children to physically 'release' their anger

(e.g. by punching a punching bag, going to a smash room). Such strategies do not address or help to regulate underlying emotions and the cause of the aggression. Some research suggests that they may inadvertently reinforce physical aggression.

AVOID empty threats.

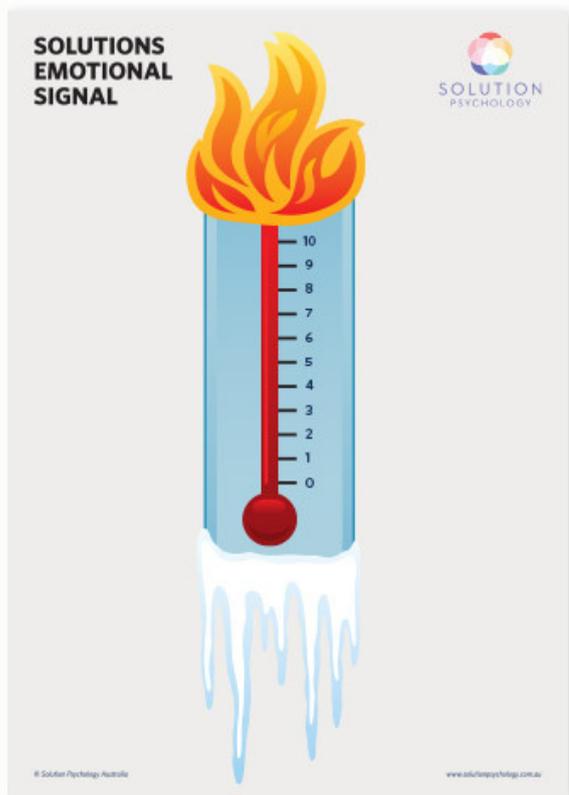
By not following through with your consequence, your child is likely to learn that they can get away with things which may maintain their behaviour.

AVOID using too much language when interacting with your child.

When experiencing a heightened emotional response, it is unlikely that your child will be able to process and understand too much information. Keep it short and simple.

EMOTIONAL THERMOMETER

Emotional thermometers are a great tool to use with children to help them visualise and share their internal emotional states. Having a physical representation available supports them to identify and describe their feelings. Practicing the recognition of emotions over time help to develop their self-awareness, allowing them to also build up their coping skills.



In its most basic form, an emotional thermometer is a picture of a thermometer with various emotional states connected to its different sections. As the “temperature” rises, so do the emotions. Starting at the bottom, we might feel calm, happy, and content. The middle part of the thermometer represents feeling just okay or a bit of discomfort. When we reach the top of the thermometer, we feel angry, out of control, or ready to explode. These visuals might utilise a red-yellow-green colour scheme or assign numbers to the different sections to represent that intensity of the feelings.

Visit the following website to better understand how to utilise and implement this tool at home:
<https://blog.zencare.co/feelings-thermometer/>

Other important things to consider:

- **Maintain and reinforce positive relationships and interactions.**

Studies suggest that children are more likely to learn desirable social and emotional regulation skills when we provide them with positive feedback for making good choices – not threats and punishments for doing the wrong thing. It's important to consistently positively reinforce socially desirable behaviours so that your child can learn and understand when they are doing the right thing.

- **Try to identify and reduce causes of stress that trigger outbursts.**

Understanding the “how” and “why” of outbursts is important in finding positive solutions. Although the problem behaviour can seem like a sudden explosion of feelings for no apparent reason, often there are patterns on when it is more or less likely to happen and some “lead up” time before the incident occurs. Even though this is time-consuming, taking a week or more to write down all observations on when and how a child gets upset often will provide insights into what changes might lead to reducing the outbursts.

- **Have idealistic expectations of your child in consideration of their level of development**

Remember that the younger your child, the less capacity they have to follow instructions, problem-solve and regulate their emotions. When children are overwhelmed, these skills can be further impaired. Understand your child and their capabilities.

To help your child develop these skills, they need opportunities to learn – by developing secure relationships family members and peers; talking about their feelings and the emotional signals of others; observing positive role models, and growing up in an environment that rewards self-control and cooperation.