Aggressive Behaviors in Children

Aggression: What’s Normal?

Negative behaviors (e.g., tantrums, hitting, biting, pushing) may be normative in early childhood and lead to opportunities to build conflict resolution and communication skills. As children reach school age, they begin to develop more complex communication skills, perspective taking skills, and behavioural control. As such, children tend to decrease in their use of physical aggression with age and may shift toward using relational aggression.

Aggressive behaviors become a cause of concern when they persist over time, are severe, & interfere with a child’s social relationships and learning.

The earlier a child who shows aggressive behaviours is identified and receives support, the greater the likelihood that the aggression will decrease.

Risk & Protective Factors

Some risk factors that can increase aggression:

- **Individual** → difficult temperament, poor emotional or behavioral control, lower cognitive ability, or comorbid mental health problems (e.g., conduct disorder).
- **Family** → harsh discipline, lenient or inconsistent parenting, poor supervision, family instability, neglect or abuse, or poor parent-child attachment.
- **Environmental** → lower SES, poor living conditions, unsafe neighborhood, or an aggressive peer group.

Some protective factors that can decrease aggression:

- **Individual** → good self-esteem, higher cognitive ability, empathic skills, good problem solving skill, or good social skills.
- **Family** → firm, fair, & consistent discipline, appropriate supervision, family stability, or positive parental involvement.
- **Environmental** → participation in extracurricular activities, success at school, positive relationship with a caring adult, or a pro-social peer group.
How Can Teachers Help: Prevention & Management

Prevention

**Classroom Expectations** → Provide clear and consistent expectations for behavior in the classroom.

**Positive Relationships** → Help children cultivate positive relationships with pro-social peers. Listen to children when they need a caring adult.

**Identify Stressors** → Help children identify the stressors that contribute to their negative feelings and behaviours and strategies to minimize their impact.

**Develop Strategies** → Help children learn strategies to proactively manage negative feelings or behaviours and resolve conflicts peacefully with peers.

**Role Play** → Use role plays to help children learn constructive ways to solve difficult social problems. Model your own strategies for children.

**Positive Reinforcement** → Help children feel good about their skills by praising & rewarding positive social behaviors.

**Discuss Relational Aggression** → Help your class understand that exclusion, rumour spreading and other mean behaviours are not okay in your class.

Management

**Feelings Strategies** → Help children use the PEERS strategies to identify the sources of their feelings, ways to manage feelings of anger, & evaluate which strategies work best for them.

**Problem Solving Strategies** → Encourage children to solve problems with other classmates using their PEERS problem solving strategies (e.g., cool down, listen to each other’s views, brainstorm solutions). Help children identify possible consequences of different strategies and evaluate which strategies work best.

**Act as a Mediator** → Guide children involved in conflicts with peers to resolve the problem peacefully. Let children know that you are a source of support.

**Encourage Children to Stand Up for Each Other** → Encourage children to support each other and to take a stand against bullying.

**Be Patient** → Help children identify ways to calm down and then discuss their inappropriate behaviors.

**Provide Appropriate Consequences** → Ensure that consequences are reasonable, consistent, & allow children to understand why they are being disciplined.

Resources

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
http://www.camh.net/About_Addiction_Mental_Health/Mental_Health Information/agg_behav_childyouth.html

Educators for Social Responsibility

Government of Alberta Bullying Prevention
http://www.bullyfreealberta.ca/safe_caring_schools.htm
http://education.alberta.ca/media/6570221/relationalaggression3952.pdf