
Children's physical aggression towards others (Handout for foster carers)

Around half of all parents describe some form of physically aggressive behaviour occurring "sometimes or often" for children as young as 12 months of age. Children aged two and three years show significantly more physically aggressive behaviour than younger children. Physical aggression usually decreases between the ages of three and four years, but may be replaced by other forms of aggression, such as verbal aggression (Alink *et al*, 2006).

In early childhood, most children start to learn to control their behaviour and to regulate their anger and other emotions. They begin to understand more about other people having feelings too. As a result, they learn to respond in a socially acceptable way instead of acting aggressively. The growth in language skills may also help as children develop the ability to verbally communicate many of their needs and wants. Children who struggle to manage their emotions and to communicate their needs may become more frustrated and this may show in angry behaviour. As you will know, most children show some physical aggression to their siblings but this may be at a level and intensity that worries you. It is important that we know about aggressive behaviours that concern you.

Temper tantrums are quite common in early childhood and need not be included in sibling assessments. The main focus is on aggressive acts that may harm another person.

Behaviours that are physically aggressive:

- Hitting
- Pulling
- Kicking
- Shaking
- Spitting
- Pushing
- Fighting
- Pinching
- Throwing
- Scratching
- or physically threatening any of these.

Behaviours that are not physically aggressive

(if not accompanied by any of the behaviours above)

- Throwing a ball or other appropriate use of toys
- Grabbing or trying to grab an object
- Resisting or trying to "escape" physical restraining
- Dropping something without throwing
- Undirected kicking of the legs or swinging of the arms
- Disobedience, rowdiness, hyperactivity, or anger
- Aggression aimed at the child's own body

Reference: Alink LR, Mesman J, van Zeiji J, Stolk MN, Juffer F, Koot HM, Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ and van IJzendoorn MH (2006) 'The early childhood aggression curve: development of physical aggression in 10- to 50-month-old children', *Child Development*, 77:4, pp. 954–66, see p962