

Why Does My Child Hurt Others?

Helping Children with an Intellectual Disability and Autism Manage their Aggression

AGGRESSION IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It's common for children and young people with autism and an intellectual disability to act aggressively sometimes when they are feeling angry, frustrated or anxious. Aggressive behaviours can include:

- verbal aggression, such as verbal insults, arguments, name-calling and taunting
- physical aggression, such as pushing, hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, scratching.

Children and young people can be aggressive towards themselves (self-injury), property, or others.

There are two key types of aggression:

- Reactive aggression – sometimes a young person hits out and hurts someone or something without thinking. They act impulsively because they are frustrated or feel threatened. At these times, they are often distressed, angry or anxious.
- Proactive aggression – is goal-directed and used to achieve something, other than hurting another person, it is often used to communicate something. If it's useful in achieving a goal (e.g. avoiding an activity, or taking an item from another person), it is likely the aggression will continue.



WHY DOES MY CHILD HURT OTHERS?

Children and young people with autism and an intellectual disability often lack the skills needed to manage big emotions and the behaviours related to them. Some of these emotions include:

- frustration – when they have difficulties making themselves understood
- frustration – when a task is too hard, or goes for too long (wanting to escape the situation)
- frustration or anger – when wanting to force access to an item or an activity
- confusion – when having trouble understanding others, or a social situation
- jealousy or competition – with peers, siblings
- anxiety or stress – e.g. about changes, feeling overwhelmed by sensory input (e.g. lights), being surprised by unexpected touch or a sudden noise
- curiosity – about what might happen if they hit out; sometimes the reactions of others are rewarding.

HOW CAN I HELP?

You can help by remaining calm – stop, take a breath, and mirror the calm you want the child or young person to feel.

It's important that any response to aggression is matched to your understanding about why your child or young person is hitting out. If you understand why they use this behaviour to manage a situation or environment, you will be better able to:

- ✓ prevent the behaviour
- ✓ respond, rather than react, if the behaviour occurs
- ✓ teach your child better ways to respond to emotions and manage behaviour.

Find out as much as you can about the behaviour – what exactly does it look like? When does it happen? What is the child or young person doing when they become distressed or hit out? What triggers the behaviour? How do those around them respond?

The Escalation Cycle can be used to help us understand what is happening for a child when they experience big emotions. It can help us decide how to respond during the different phases of an escalation.

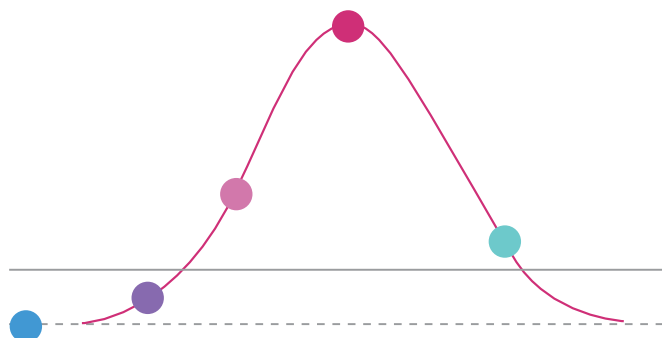
For example, if you notice that your child is looking restless and is beginning to show some early warning signs of frustration and escalation, you could offer an alternate activity, taking some deep breaths together, or suggesting a movement break outside.

The goal is to intervene early and return the young person to a calm state.



The Escalation Cycle looks a little like a volcano of emotion. It can describe a slow build of pressure after some early rumblings, or a quick eruption without warning.

THE ESCALATION CYCLE



- **Baseline** - the child is calm, and interacting and participating as usual
- **Early warning signs** - first signs that they are unsettled
- **Escalation** – increased difficulties, very unsettled
- **Crisis** - someone or something is hurt
- **De-escalation** - the incident is over and the young person is calming down.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Provide certainty and structure: make sure the child knows what's happening each day. Provide information and support around changes to the schedule and routines. Communicate about these using visual supports. Build in time to relax, and time alone to unwind.

Focus on building skills, including how to identify different emotions, and how to express needs in an appropriate way.

Practise coping strategies and calming techniques.

Praise calm, co-operative behaviour.

Avoid situations that trigger difficulties while you are teaching the skills and strategies necessary to manage them.

Minimise exposure to violent content on screens: children can learn inappropriate ways of resolving difficulties and having their needs met by watching violence.

Reduce the sensory load by turning off music, turning down lights, reducing the number of people around, etc. Consider creating a calm space for when the child is overwhelmed.

Re-direction or distraction: try a new activity, a preferred activity, or a movement-based option. Offer more help, or an opportunity to be independent.

Offer choices: choices provide the child with control, and help diffuse a situation when a child feels forced to participate, or they have been prevented from accessing an item or activity.

Stay calm: Don't let your feelings drive your response. Responding in anger is likely to escalate the difficulties. Take a deep breath. This will help you think and communicate more clearly.

Slow it down and use fewer words: Usually, when a child hits out, it's because they're feeling stressed. Stress makes it harder to process and understand what others are saying.



Use gestures to help promote understanding: Use simple, natural gestures as you speak to promote understanding while the child is upset and struggling to process verbal language.

Model calming strategies: Think about *coping strategies* e.g. deep breathing, having a mindful snack, taking a break, or *distracting strategies* e.g. do some cooking, water the garden, or *physical strategies* e.g. squeeze a cushion, or a stress ball, go for a walk.

Prioritise safety and maintain supervision during crisis. Allow time and space: Move the child to a quiet, safe place where they can re-gain control. If you cannot move the child, ask others to step away.

Provide re-assurance: have one person talk at a time. Don't talk much – just be available. Don't try to reason or negotiate, don't threaten punishment if they don't calm down.

Handover to another adult if you feel unsafe or you think you cannot remain calm. If the child and others are safe, monitor from a safe distance while the situation calms.

Praise attempts to calm. Help the child restore relationships. Encourage participation in an activity in a quiet and gentle way. Allow the child to calm completely and re-engage in routine before discussing what happened.

Prioritise self-care - being calm and consistent is hard work.

WHEN & WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

If you are worried about your child or young person's aggression, several professionals may be able to help:

- Your child's teaching team – working collaboratively with the school can be helpful in promoting learning and wellbeing.
- A Behaviour Support Practitioner or Psychologist can assess the 'why' driving the aggression, and can recommend proactive and response strategies. They can also help with teaching pro-social skills, tolerance and coping skills, and emotional regulation skills.
- A Speech Pathologist can assist the child in making themselves understood, and help them to understand messages from others.
- An Occupational Therapist can assess a child's sensory profile and recommend calming and soothing activities.
- GP, Paediatrician or Paediatric Psychiatrist – if you are concerned about anxiety, agitation, or behavioural difficulties that have not responded to positive behaviour support, a medical practitioner may suggest medication to reduce some symptoms in the short term.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

