

When Play Becomes Too Rough

Grown-ups don't usually bite a too-demanding supervisor or hit a friend who rebuffs them. Yet children who are still learning the social skills that are the basis of relationships may react in just those ways.

Children less than a year old get visibly excited when they see other babies, but often treat them as objects to explore, poke, or pull. Toddlers sometimes bite or hit when they are frustrated by the behavior of other children. Older pre-school children may become overly excited when playing together and "accidentally" behave in aggressive ways. For example, chasing games almost always seem to end up with a child getting knocked down or tripping, and with enthusiastic play changing suddenly into anger. Children of this age also frequently fight over possessions, grabbing or hitting to get what they want. Many school-age children have arguments about rules for games and these arguments sometimes turn violent.

How can adults cope with such behavior and teach their children gentler methods of resolving disputes?

Children may need adults to stop violence, to hear and acknowledge their feelings and to guide them to develop communication techniques that help them maintain their play. Adults need to be observant of children's interactions in social situations and recognize when they must intervene, because children need help, and when they can let children solve their own problems. Parents and caregivers should take a potentially rough or violent situation in hand and encourage verbal communication between the children.

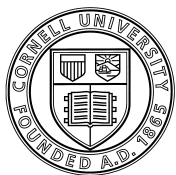
Overly rough children may not be aware of the distress they cause to other children and be genuinely puzzled when others don't want to play with them. Adults can explain how and why the behavior is undesirable and show these children how to play less aggressively or violently. For example, a parent can say, "She doesn't want to play when you hit her with the ball. Try rolling it to her."

If the child is truly angry, help him or her use words to communicate his or her feelings and desires, rather than expressing them physically. Say to the child, "You look very mad. Can you tell him what you want? He can't understand what you need when you push him."

Given such help, children often find their own ways of resolving conflict. Sometimes children's solutions may not seem 'fair' to adults. For example, most adults want children to take turns with a toy when children fight over it, but children may solve the problem when one child simply finds another toy to play with. In most cases the process of figuring out a satisfying arrangement is more important than meeting adult standards of fairness.

Children, to a large part, should be left to devise their own rules and methods for playing together, but adults should be aware that, when conflict arises, it can turn physical very quickly. Under no circumstances, should adults allow one child to hurt another child. In these instances, parents and caregivers should intervene and show children how they can solve their problems non-violently. Adults can guide children toward more effective means of resolving conflicts and teach skills children can carry into their play and many other social situations.

Source: Suzanne E. West, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.



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