



Talking with kids about

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR





AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Your 5-year old daughter Sarah gets into a scuffle on the playground with Mathis, a boy of the same age. What began as a verbal altercation soon escalates into a heated physical dispute. You and Mathis' mother are on the playground as well, observing the scene. How would you react? What kinds of reaction possibilities are there to promote the development of democratic competence?

As adults, and particularly as educators and reference persons, children challenge us again and again with their behavior. They often exhibit behavior patterns that are incompatible with our values and even contradict them. Perhaps the most dramatic example for this is "aggressive behavior".

In this chapter you will find information about aggressive behavior ([page 2](#)), you will get tips for dealing with it ([page 3](#)) and you can read about some of the possibilities to prevent it ([page 8](#)).

Helpful further information:

The Center for Nonviolent Communication: <https://www.cnvc.org/>

Omer, Haim (2011). The new authority: Family, school and community. Cambridge University Press.



Why is my child aggressive? – Understanding the causes of aggression

Contrary to popular belief, aggressiveness is not an innate character trait. It is rather an inherent behavior which can appear in certain situations or events that are considered dangerous by our brain. This is sometimes essential for survival, and it certainly was for our stone age ancestors.

Every aggressive behavior has a reason, which is informed by our brain's assessment of a situation. This individually perceived border transgression is responsible for a person's aggressive behavior. The most obvious trigger for violence is physical pain. A person who is punched will most likely punch back. However, psychological pain, such as social marginalization, injustice or contempt, is processed in the same areas of the brain as physical pain and thus is considered a reason for aggression as well. The threshold of when a border transgression is deemed to occur is highly individual. A wrong glance may suffice for one child to snap whereas another one will only respond violently if pushed and punched by others.

Aggression as a reaction to a border transgression does not necessarily have to target the transgressor who crossed the line. If a child is humiliated by an older student, the aggressive reaction of the child will probably not be directed against the aggressor who is presumably stronger, but perhaps against that student's younger and weaker brother. Aggressiveness can also appear at a later point in time, such that no connection with the original border transgression can be established. Thus, aggressive behavior can be encountered simply out of nothing, and we have the impression that the child is "simply like that" for no obvious reasons, aggressive against himself or other children.

Thus, aggressive behavior is always to be understood as a kind of an appeal. It is well worth to take a closer look, particularly with children who frequently exhibit aggressive behavior. Which lines are constantly being crossed? By whom? How are the boundaries violated? How can I support the child who experienced the border transgression? How could the child deal differently with his aggression?

An important task of education is to provide the children with a way to deal with aggressive feelings. We are in no way hostage to our brain and have the ability to respond to border transgressions in other ways than violence. Human beings are able to reflect on their actions and consequences, and therefore can determine if their reaction is socially compatible. To instill this in our children is one of our fundamental challenges as parents. Violent videos and games where children see violence as a way to succeed are counterproductive from an educational perspective, as children learn many things by imitation. They experience violence as a way forward in numerous games and could possibly transfer this attitude into their real, daily lives. For this reason, parents must be vigilant about the games their children play, as well as the videos they watch.



What can I do? – Tips for dealing with aggressive behavior

Are you all too familiar with the initial situation from the playground? In what follows, we have compiled a few behavioral guidelines and tips for you about how to deal with such situations in the future:

- Observe the situation carefully: is it just a minor tussle, a scuffle among peers? As such, it would be quite possible to let the situation continue for the time being and to observe it carefully. If everything remains fair, it is perhaps just a trial of strength, and parental intervention is not at all necessary. However, if a child begins to hit hard, acts unfairly, or if one of the participants is in danger, you must absolutely intervene and separate the "brawlers".
- Now, delay your reaction to the aggressive behavior of your daughter. Ranting, threatening, or even engaging in physical violence against her, does not further the child's understanding that violence does not solve problems. Aggressive, angry behaviors in response to violence on the child's part, in fact triggers a spiral of violence which can shake the foundation of any good upbringing, namely the trusting parent-child relationship.

Thus, make sure that no child can get hurt, separate them, create a physical distance between the contentious parties, remain calm and collected, and let situation cool down. Reassure yourself and your child: "This behavior is not acceptable, and we will come back to that in calmer circumstances." Thus, the problematic behavior is not discussed in an emotional state, to be discussed again later, rationally, and with the help of the mind.

- When the emotions have subsided, we recommend a discussion about aggressive behavior, following the principle of "Nonviolent communication" by Marshall B. Rosenberg. (For further information, please visit the following homepage <https://www.cnvc.org/>)

The basic assumption in Rosenberg's 4-step model is that behind every human action (thus also behind the childish dispute in the aforementioned playground example), there are certain feelings and needs. As demonstrated by the aggression example, behind every aggressive action is a border transgression (see chapter: Why is my child aggressive? - Understanding the causes of aggression, [page 2](#)). These, and the feelings and needs associated with them, can be uncovered through compassionate communication. Peaceful ways of conflict resolution and satisfaction of needs can now be found through dialog. In what follows, here are the 4 steps towards a dialog in the sense of non-violent communication:

1. Observations

Initially, try to describe precisely what kinds of behavior you have seen. Make sure not to interpret or evaluate the behavior. Your child, the receiver of your observations, should know exactly to what you refer.

You want to know what a “receiver” is? See the document [“Talking with kids about their body and sexuality” chapter “Foundations of human communication”](#) on page 9.

2. Feelings

Then, share with the child the sentiments which your observations have triggered in you. Should you lack the words to describe your feelings, or those of your child, you can find a list with a compilation of the various feelings on [page 10](#). These feelings are directly linked with a need.

3. Needs

These comprise essential qualities which all human beings desire (or would like to have) in their lives. They include fundamental needs, such as sleep, food and drink, but also longing for love, security and self-realization.

What other needs are there? How do I state them accurately? For information, consult the list from the Center for Nonviolent Communication on [page 12](#). Now, formulate them in conjunction with the feeling and state the resulting wish or request.

4. Requests

With this request you formulate an action or a behavior which results from the need. Here, you differentiate between requesting and desiring: requests are concrete actions, whereas wishes are more vague, relating to future conditions (e.g. “be kinder to older persons!”). Requests have a higher chance of success, as they define more concretely the desired behavior. Thus, requesting is more appropriate, particularly for educating small children.

Since it is difficult enough for adults to articulate their feelings and needs, it must not be assumed that children are able to express them more easily. Therefore, it is even more important that you, as parents, be sensitive to their utterances. By way of emphatic listening (clarifying and repeating of what has been said is a core concept of the model), the listeners can give the senders the opportunity to achieve clarity about their own thoughts, feelings and needs. (What is a sender? For basic information about communication please read the document [“Talking with kids about their body and sexuality” chapter “Foundations of human communication”](#) on page 9). This is the optimal condition for finding common, alternative behavior patterns which require no physical violence to satisfy needs.

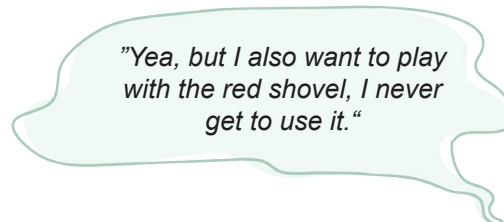
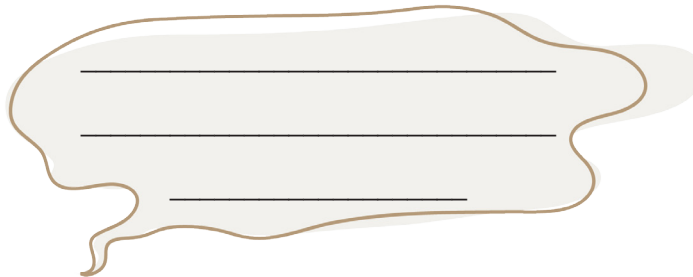
Example dialog

How exactly could such a dialog following the fight on the playground be carried out? Imagine you are the mother. Your aim is to clarify the needs of your daughter and to show your daughter different options on how to satisfy these needs in a non-violent way.

Try to fill in the mother's speech bubbles with the help of the indicated hints and questions. Also take into consideration the given answers of your imagined daughter.

Ready? Or no ideas what to say/ fill in? On [page 13](#) you find a suggestion for this dialog.

Communicate observations.



What kinds of feelings/needs are behind Sarah's words?



"All the other kids play with Mathis' stuff, but I'm not allowed."



What kind of underlying need is behind this?



"Yea, I'm never allowed to play with them."



Please share and formulate your own feelings.



“He won’t let me do it anyway...”



Try to address Sarah’s feelings once more and offer a proposal for a solution.



“Ok, I guess I can give it a try.”





What can I do before an outbreak of violence? – Preventive pedagogical behavior

What can you do, fundamentally, so that your child does not ever resort to violence? First, it should be borne in mind that aggression is an innate behavior, a reaction which occurs in certain situations, as all human beings know themselves. Thus, it is quite normal to develop aggressive feelings resulting from border transgressions, as we know from chapter 1 “Why is my child aggressive?”.

Therefore, it is not a matter of prohibiting aggressive feelings, but rather of question of finding proper ways to deal with them, and to pass these on to the children.

1. My function as a role model:

Children learn a great deal by imitation. As parents, you always fulfill a role model function for your children. They see how your behavior patterns may lead to a greater or lesser degree of success in certain situations. Accordingly, the children will want to try out the observed behaviors. Thus, as a first step, you must consider and assess your own behaviors. Consider the following reflection questions:

- How do we treat each other within the family in everyday life?
- How do we treat each other as (marriage) partners?
- How do we deal with our children? Do we use destructive messages? What are “destructive messages”? See the document [“Talking with kids about tidying up”](#) chapter [“Destructive messages”](#) on page 5.
- How do I deal with border transgressions as an adult?
- Where is my individual threshold for getting angry, until I exhibit aggressive behavior?

2. Vigilant care

The vigilant care concept describes the caring awareness with which the parents treat and look out for their children and their children’s lives. Responsible parents and strong parent-child relationships are essential for a successful educational process. Remain in contact with your children, thus showing them: I love you and you are important to me. You are responsible for the lives of your children; therefore, it is your parental duty to take an interest in your children and their lives. If you are afraid that your children may become aggressive in playing, you must accompany them very closely: Play actively along with them or climb on the slide yourselves (when visiting a playground). This way, you are in position to immediately clear up and explain a situation which your children might perceive as a border transgression. Thus, your children learn to correctly assess a situation and to deal with aggressive thoughts.

If you participate actively in the lives of your children, you are informed about their interests and aware of

their feelings and needs. If something should not turn out exactly as your children had hoped, you have an opportunity to search for alternative solutions and possibilities for action together. If the situation spirals out of control, you as parents are not caught by surprise, and thus able to intervene in a timely manner to protect your children.

For more information about the concept of vigilant care, please visit the following homepage: <http://www.newauthority.net/topics/parents/vigilantcare.aspx>

3. Avoiding escalations

When it comes to turning off the TV or cutting off the non-stop use of smartphones, one word may lead to another, as you have surely experienced already. Suddenly, you find yourselves embroiled in the middle of a spiral of escalation which, in the worst case, may end in physical violence. Therefore, it is worth making the effort to avoid an escalation. Here are a few suggestions:

- Do not react instantly to a provocation. Instead, try to engage in a dialog later.
- You may not be able to control the behavior of your children, but surely you can control your own. For once, try to break through this spiral of escalation with silence!
- It is not a question of winning in a discussion with your children. However, you must make it clear to them what kinds of behavior you will not condone (in this case violent behavior) and that you will oppose it.

One possible form of resistance is the so-called sit-in. You go into the room of your children for a previously determined time and declare that you are now silently awaiting their proposal about how they would like to modify their exhibited behavior.

List of Feelings

Feelings when your needs are satisfied

AFFECTIONATE

compassionate
friendly
loving
open hearted
sympathetic
tender
warm

ENGAGED

absorbed
alert
curious
engrossed
enchanted
entranced
fascinated
interested
intrigued
involved
spellbound
stimulated

HOPEFUL

expectant
encouraged
optimistic

CONFIDENT

empowered
open
proud
safe
secure

EXCITED

amazed
animated
ardent
aroused
astonished
dazzled
eager
energetic
enthusiastic
giddy
invigorated
lively
passionate
surprised
vibrant

GRATEFUL

appreciative
moved
thankful
touched

INSPIRED

amazed
awed
wonder

JOYFUL

amused
delighted
glad
happy
jubilant
pleased
tickled

EXHILARATED

blissful
ecstatic
elated
enthralled
exuberant
radiant
rapturous
thrilled

PEACEFUL

calm
clear headed
comfortable
centered
content
equanimous
fulfilled
mellow
quiet
relaxed
relieved
satisfied
serene
still
tranquil
trusting

REFRESHED

enlivened
rejuvenated
renewed
rested
restored
revived

Feelings when your needs are not satisfied

AFRAID

apprehensive
dread
foreboding
frightened
mistrustful
panicked
petrified
scared
suspicious
terrified
wary
worried

ANNOYED

aggravated
dismayed
disgruntled
displeased
exasperated
frustrated
impatient
irritated
irked

ANGRY

enraged
furious
incensed
indignant
irate
livid
outraged
resentful

AVERSION

animosity
appalled
contempt
disgusted
dislike
hate
horrified
hostile
repulsed

CONFUSED

ambivalent
baffled
bewildered
dazed
hesitant
lost
mystified
perplexed
puzzled
torn

DISCONNECTED

alienated
aloof
apathetic
bored
cold
detached
distant
distracted
indifferent
numb
removed
uninterested
withdrawn

DISQUIET

agitated
alarmed
discombobulated
disconcerted
disturbed
perturbed
rattled
restless
shocked
startled
surprised
troubled
turbulent
turmoil
uncomfortable
uneasy
unnerved
unsettled
upset

EMBARRASSED

ashamed
chagrined
flustered
guilty
mortified
self-conscious

FATIGUE

beat
burnt out
depleted
exhausted
lethargic
listless
sleepy
tired
weary
worn out

PAIN

agony
anguished
bereaved
devastated
grief
heartbroken
hurt
lonely
miserable
regretful
remorseful

SAD

depressed
dejected
despair
despondent
disappointed
discouraged
disheartened
forlorn
gloomy
heavy hearted
hopeless
melancholy
unhappy
wretched

TENSE

anxious
cranky
distressed
distraught
edgy
fidgety
frazzled
irritable
jittery
nervous
overwhelmed
restless
stressed out

VULNERABLE

fragile
guarded
helpless
insecure
leery
reserved
sensitive
shaky

YEARNING

envious
jealous
longing
nostalgic
pining
wistful

List of Needs

CONNECTION

acceptance
affection
appreciation
belonging
cooperation
communication
closeness
community
companionship
compassion
consideration
consistency
empathy
inclusion
intimacy
love
mutuality
nurturing
respect/self-respect
safety
security
stability
support
to know and be known
to see and be seen
to understand and
be understood
trust
warmth

PHYSICAL

WELL-BEING

air
food
movement/exercise
rest/sleep
sexual expression
safety
shelter
touch
water

HONESTY

authenticity
integrity
presence

PLAY

joy
humor

PEACE

beauty
communion
ease
equality
harmony
inspiration
order

AUTONOMY

choice
freedom
independence
space
spontaneity

MEANING

awareness
celebration of life
challenge
clarity
competence
consciousness
contribution
creativity
discovery
efficacy
effectiveness
growth
hope
learning
mourning
participation
purpose
self-expression
stimulation
to matter
understanding

Example dialog- suggestion

Now you can compare your own dialog with this suggestion. Or you can use some of the ideas to formulate what the mother is saying:

Communicate observations.



*SUGGESTION:
"Sarah, this morning on the
playground, you were hitting and
biting Mathis."*

*"Yea, but I also want to play
with the red shovel, I never
get to use it."*



What kinds of feelings/needs are behind Sarah's words?



SUGGESTION:
"Are you sad because you cannot play with his shovel? Do you want to bring your own shovel next time?"

"All the other kids play with Mathis' stuff, but I'm not allowed."



What kind of underlying need is behind this?



SUGGESTION:
"You feel that you are treated unjustly, and you would like to play with his toys as well?"

"Yea, I'm never allowed to play with them."



Please share and formulate your own feelings.



SUGGESTION:
"Sarah, when you start hitting and biting others, I am afraid for the other children. You could injure and hurt them. Next time, why don't you ask him nicely if he will let you play along with them?"

"He won't let me do it anyway..."



Try to address Sarah's feelings once more and offer a proposal for a solution.



SUGGESTION
"I can see that you're still very angry. But give it a try next time with kind words. If that does not work, come straight to see me, and we will think about what else you could say. Agreed?"

"Ok, I guess I can give it a try."



„Talking with kids about aggressive behavior“ is based on the following references:

Casalini, Sandra. 2018 a. «Das aggressive Kind.» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Mai, 10-31.

Casalini, Sandra. 2018 b. «Das Prinzip des gewaltlosen Widerstandes.» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Mai, 26-27.

Omer, Haim und Philip Streit. 2018. *Neue Autorität: Das Geheimnis starker Eltern*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 37 ff, 62.

Zimet, Nadine. 2015 a. «Erziehen ohne Strafen- ja, das geht!» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Dezember. retrieved 22.03.2019.

<https://www.fritzundfraenzi.ch/erziehung/elternbildung/erziehen-ohne-strafen-ja-das-geht>

Zimet, Nadine. 2015 b. «Einen Konflikt ohne Strafe austragen- ein Beispiel.» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Dezember. retrieved 22.03.2019.

<https://www.fritzundfraenzi.ch/erziehung/elternbildung/einen-konflikt-ohne-strafe-austragen-ein-beispiel>