

Parents' Role in Taming Aggression

by David L. Smoot, Ph.D.

Barbara and Jim brought Jeffrey to my office when he was five years old. His habit of hitting other children at the slightest provocation was bad enough, but when he began striking teachers and Barbara they decided to seek professional help.

Jim found himself losing his temper and shouting and spanking when Jeffrey got into a fight. Jim and Barbara recalled that Jeffrey had always had a temper and did not seem to care that he hurt others. Barbara vividly remembered Jeffrey hitting a little girl out of the blue and then laughing about it. They feared that the flames of his smoldering anger would be fanned even hotter by the way boys are often given credit for being "tough," by aggressive -- even violent images -- on television and video games, and by the pattern of punishment and escalating anger at home and school.

Despite all these discouraging points, parents must believe that they truly can effect positive change in an aggressive child's behavior. Certainly, today's culture provides ample competition that derides the family values which parents try to instill in their children. Parents often wonder if they can change aggressive behavior in a child such as Jeffrey. However, studies show that parents can protect their aggressive children from many of these negative influences by raising them in a warm, reasonable, and supportive environment.

Concern for others and empathy are factors frequently named in determining whether a child behaves aggressively toward others. Children who are interested only in what is good for themselves and do not feel sympathy or compassion for others frequently do not hesitate to take actions that will hurt or disadvantage another child. Researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health recently found that the most aggressive children actually showed diminishing concern for the feeling of others as they moved from preschool to school age. Children who were aggressive as preschoolers yet had a higher level of compassion for others tended to drop much of their aggressive behavior by elementary school. The children who had or developed empathy and concern for others tended to have mothers who were described as warm, caring, and supportive while still capable of setting firm and reasonable limits.

Finnish researchers recently found that this style of positive parenting helped aggressive children from falling into a repetitive cycle of failure, problem behavior, substance abuse, and occupational under-employment or unemployment. Positive parents who were supportive, involved, and warm in their family relationships and who were in control of their own emotions reduced the chances that their aggressive children would suffer from school maladjustment, poor peer relations, and occupational failure. This particular study followed children from age 8 all the way to age 36 years.

These findings suggest that children raised by warm, reasonable, and involved parents are better equipped to survive and thrive as adults. Positive parents show **warmth** for their children, making it clear that they are loved even when they make poor decisions. Positive parents hold their children in high esteem so that they may develop their own high self esteem. Positive parents show loving support and will not withdraw love to make a point or to "get

even.”

Positive parents set **reasonable limits** and enforce the rules consistently, fairly, and respectfully. They do not have to rely on “*Because I said so*” as a rationale for their rules, but instead explain that their children are expected to make good choices “*Because the situation calls for it.*” Positive parents use logical consequences rather than punishments. Punishments result in suffering, resentment, and rebellion; logical consequences lead to learning, understanding, and changing. Positive parents understand what is appropriate for their child and do not expect perfection from their children or themselves.

Positive parenting can help parents like Barbara and Jim make a difference in Jeffrey’s life. They can teach him to understand the hurt he causes others by emphasizing how a fellow student is hurt by his actions rather than stressing “what a bad boy he was.” They can focus on making amends and restoring the relationship rather than punishment. They can teach Jeffrey alternatives to aggression when he is feeling angry or threatened. Throughout it all, they can maintain a warm and supportive environment for Jeffrey by trying to understand where he is coming from and reinforcing positive ways he tries to cope with challenges in his life.

Empathy for others, emotional security and esteem for one’s self, and positive coping skills play pivotal roles in helping aggressive preschoolers become successful and cooperative as they mature. Parents should seize the opportunity to effect these changes through positive parenting rather than throwing up their hands when their child needs them most.