Welcome to GUI103

Children’s aggressive and defiant behaviors pose a tremendous challenge to adults at every level, from the early childhood environment through high school. In this course, participants will learn about the underlying causes of aggressive behavior, the reasons why aggressive behaviors cannot be ignored, and strategies and practices for helping children develop positive social-emotional skills.

Objectives:

By taking notes on the handout provided in this course, completing reflection exercises, and successfully answering assessment questions, participants will meet the following objectives as a result of taking this course:

- Identify characteristics of aggressive behaviors
- Identify basic strategies for promoting healthy social-emotional development in children of all ages
- Differentiate between instrumental aggression and hostile aggression
- Recognize the importance of developmental appropriateness when responding to aggressive behavior
- Identify recommended "dos and don'ts" when intervening in a child's aggressive behaviors
- Recognize criteria for determining when to seek professional help for aggressive behaviors
- Identify and define essential goals of positive guidance, including self-identity, self-respect, self-regulation, self-confidence, and self-discipline
- Identify recommended classroom management strategies that discourage aggressive behaviors, including bullying, and promote positive social-emotional development
- Identify characteristics of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD)

References:

Defining Aggression and Defiance

Aggression:

Defiance:

What Causes Aggressiveness?

Instead of automatically attacking or running away from our interpersonal problems, we learn to:

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Understanding Aggression

Adults help children learn how to solve conflicts without resorting to physical aggression by teaching them to:

- Control impulses
- Express their feelings (verbally or through other nonviolent means)
- Negotiate
- Listen to other people’s perspectives
- Play cooperatively
Build Children's Skills

Comfort:

- The more choices children can see, the less likely they will act aggressively.
- Read stories about characters who experience various emotions. Talk about characters’ choices and the consequences of their decisions.
- Offer moderate praise to help build confidence and reinforce appropriate behaviors.

Play:

- Adults should engage with children in pretend play, including scenarios in which characters get frustrated, scared, or angry; talk about alternatives; act out different possible actions and consequences.
- Rough and tumble play is natural and important for development, but it needs to be monitored closely. Be prepared to intervene and discuss appropriate behavior and choices.

Teach:

- Teach by helping children fix their problems, including treating someone they hurt.
- Use routines to teach and reinforce appropriate social behaviors.
- Offer frequent reminders about positive behaviors.
- Review and discuss rules and limits regularly (not just when rules are broken).

Observe, Monitor, and Respond Consistently

When a child’s behavior is disruptive or harmful:

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When the crisis subsides, and everyone has calmed down, the adult needs to reflect on what happened before, during, and after the aggressive behavior.

- What triggered the behavior?
- Could it have been prevented?
- Was your intervention effective?
- Will it happen again?
Basic Types of Childhood Aggression

**Instrumental:**

**Hostile:**

Types of Instrumental Aggression

Author and psychologist William DeMeo adds more detail, describing 4 main reasons for (instrumental) aggressive behavior, as outlined in *When Nothing Else Works: What Early Childhood Professionals Can Do to Reduce Challenging Behaviors*.

1. To escape or avoid an undesirable situation (e.g., avoid a particular group activity).
2. To get positive or negative social attention (e.g., receiving a hug or redirection).
3. To gain access to a desired item or activity (e.g., receiving a sticker or being able to go outside and play).
4. To access or avoid sensory input (e.g., enjoying the feeling of shaking their hands or reacting negatively to a hug).

**About Biting...**

Biting can be:

- **Investigative-exploratory** (infants are naturally curious and just learning how to use their mouths and new teeth).
- **Action-reaction** (the child is curious about how the other child or adults in the room will react).
- **Purposeful** (i.e., instrumental, biting to get something or express anger).

Ultimately, the exact way in which a caregiver responds to any given situation depends on several factors:

- How well do you know the child?
- Has this happened before?
- Is the child breaking a rule? Do they know better?
- Do they understand the consequences?

As you try to figure out the root cause of the conflict, you might ask:

- Does this child normally resort to aggression to solve problems?
- Did something else happen in their life to make them feel more aggressive today?
- What skills does the child need to learn to prevent aggressive situations in the future?
- **Or**, could the root cause be that there simply are not enough blocks to go around?
How and Why to Intervene

Handling aggressive behavior is always among the most wanted training topics for people who work with children of all ages.

- How do you avoid those outbursts of violence and emotional turmoil?
- How do you deal with one child’s act of defiance without ruining everyone else’s day?
- What do you do during the moment the behavior occurs?
- What is the best way to stop and keep the peace?

In the Heat of the Moment: Dos and Don’ts

Do intervene when you witness aggressive behavior (unless it is among very young children, as discussed earlier).

Do make your presence known.

Do NOT escalate the situation by reacting with aggression. Stay calm.

- Do NOT place your hands on the aggressor unless you absolutely must do so to avert an imminent bodily threat to you or someone else.
- Do NOT threaten them.
- Do NOT insult them.
- Do NOT do anything that is intended to hurt, humiliate, harass, subdue, or otherwise harm.

Do focus first on the victim. For example, if one child hits another child, intervene immediately and ask the victim, "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" This focuses the aggressor’s attention on the consequences of their actions, a key to developing empathy.

Do NOT ask the victim, "Why did they hit you?" This places blame on the victim and justifies the aggressive behavior.

Do attempt to talk to both parties immediately to resolve the conflict.

Do make sure the rest of the children in the room are under proper supervision. Unless the issue is of a personal or private nature, it is fine if other children in the class observe as you help resolve the conflict, but do so quietly and politely.

Do NOT try to force emotions out of the situation. Emotions are natural and normal; children need to develop appropriate responses. For example, instead of saying, "Do not cry" or "Do not yell," say, "I can tell by your face that you are feeling sad. Can you help me understand what happened?" or "Sometimes it feels good to yell. Is yelling helping you feel better right now?" These questions can both diffuse and legitimize the child’s feelings.

Do let the aggressor know that there will be consequences for the behavior. However, you do not necessarily need to initiate the consequences immediately. Talking it out and resolving the conflict is more important than punishment.

Do NOT ignore the physical acts of aggression, even if it seems minor. A nudge can be just as aggressive as a shove.

Do NOT let the behavior slide or say, "Okay, I had better not see that again, or there will be consequences." If the behavior was enough to get your attention and cause you to intervene, then
there should be consequences. Letting it slide "this time" may reinforce the notion that aggressive behavior is only somewhat inappropriate.

**Do** ask the aggressor, "*What is the problem?*" There will be time to focus on the "*Why did you do that?*" later. First, focus on the problem at hand and try to talk it through with both parties.

**Do NOT** say, "*Why did you hit them?*" or "*Why are you fighting?*" This only serves to ignore/overlook the aggressive action and justify it by suggesting that there may be a good reason. There is not.

**Do** give the aggressor the benefit of the doubt. They know there will be consequences and that their action was wrong, but they also might have a legitimate complaint or issue that needs to be addressed.

**Do NOT** assume you know what happened or that there is only one guilty party. There are different kinds of aggression. If one child goads another using passive aggression or verbal threats to the point that the other lashes out, *both* parties have engaged in aggressive behavior. *Both forms of aggression need to be addressed.*

**Criteria for Seeking Professional Help**

**Criteria for determining when to seek professional help:**

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**Positive Guidance Goals and Techniques**

**The Basic Positive Guidance Goals**

**Build Self-Identity**
Build Self-Respect and Self-Esteem

Promote Self-Regulation Skills

Promote Self-Confidence

Encourage Self-Discipline

Focus on Skills Related to Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking

What about Temper Tantrums?

Avoiding Tantrum Triggers

Here are some basic pointers for helping to avoid tantrum triggers:

- **Observe children’s tantrums.**

- **Set realistic limits and stick to a routine.**

- **Give children warnings before transitions.**

- **Challenge children without frustrating them.**
Coping with a Tantrum

Tantrums may occur without warning. How will you respond?

- Stay calm.
- Pause before you act.
- Try distracting the child.
- Ignore the tantrum.
- Hold the child.
- Comfort and reassure the child.
- Talk about the problem when the child calms down.

The Role of Classroom Management

Here are some basics to keep in mind:

- Children are less likely to act out when their minds or bodies are engaged in a positive, enriching activity.
- Always try to understand the root cause of a child’s behavior. For example, if there is a supply shortage, children may become frustrated and compete aggressively for materials. However, a supply shortage is not an excuse for aggression, and the behavior must be addressed.
- Pay attention to children’s social interactions and relationships. We should always encourage children to mix and mingle with other children, but certain combinations may encourage aggressive behaviors. For example, perhaps 2 children never seem to get along, or 2 children always bully others whenever they get on the same team; triggers like these can be addressed, but only if the adult is aware they exist.
- Be consistent with expectations and consequences to help ensure that students understand that rules will be enforced. You will be more successful with behavior management if you clearly communicate expectations to students.

Indicators of Effective Classroom Management
These indicators make it less likely and, more importantly, **promote an atmosphere where young people (all ages) can develop positive, effective social-emotional skills.**

- The classroom is organized to encourage order, participation, independence, and continuous learning.
- There are a small number of meaningful rules.
- Students understand and reinforce rules.
- The teacher is consistently teaching individualized behavior management skills.
- Students who demonstrate appropriate behaviors consistently receive positive reinforcement and praise.
- The teacher handles inappropriate behavior in a firm, fair, consistent, and caring manner.
- The teacher’s interactions with students are positive and reinforce the importance of student success.
- The teacher has several motivators that reinforce and shape positive behaviors.
- Classroom instruction is well organized, meaningful, and allows for student differences.
- Classroom management strategies are appropriate to the environment and needs of the students.
- There is an established communications system between home and school.

**The Rules**

What good things do rules promote?

- Rules keep us safe.
- Rules help us learn more effectively.
- Rules strengthen community and friendships.
- Rules protect individual rights. (e.g., anti-bullying rules).

*Work with children to compose a list of why rules are important, and then brainstorm ideas for actual rules to help meet these goals.*

To start, you might use some of the following phrases with preschoolers:

- We keep each other safe.
- We listen to each other.
- We take care of our materials.

Here are some examples of simple but effective class rules teachers and students have developed in school-age environments:

"**Respect what others have to say.**"

This rule can be the basis of a rich conversation.

- Why do others deserve respect?
- How do you give or show respect for others?
- Why is it important to hear what they have to say?
- How will we know if this rule is broken?
- What should be the consequences?
"Think before you act."

But a rule like this provides a constant platform for reflection.

- Why did I do that?
- Did I think about the consequences first?
- Did I consider how my behavior might affect others?
- What can I do to make up for it?

"Be cool."

The children and teachers decided on this phrase after a lengthy discussion of general behavior expectations, including:

- Hands to yourself.
- Do not run.
- Do not interrupt.
- Have respect.
- Listen to others.
- Speak clearly.
- Wait your turn, etc.

**Different Levels of Rules**

**Schedules and Routines**

With young children, **be sure to plan carefully for the following routines and transitions:**

- Arrival and departure
- Naptime
- Transitions before, during, and after meals
- Self-help routines (toileting, washing hands)
- Clean-up
- Transitions from one activity to another
When Rules, Routines, and Positive Guidance Are Not Enough

Typical Factors that Foster Aggression

Human behavior is complex, but if a child’s aggressive behavior is cause for concern, these are areas to consider:

- Genetic and unpredictable influences that are shaped by experiences.
- Insecure or disorganized attachment patterns can shape brain patterns that heighten the levels of aggression.
- Ongoing and unrelieved stress.
- Lack of appropriate problem solving and coping strategies.
- Limited experience with role models who value non-aggressive behaviors.
- Ineffective child-rearing style (authoritarian, controlling, harsh or coercive, permissive, overindulgent, rejection, psychological problems such as depression, alcoholism).
- Poor fit between guardian and child.
- Family stress, disruption, and conflict.
- Instability and the lack of a safe environment.
- Neurological damage such as an acquired brain injury.

The list above is not exhaustive, and it is not for diagnostic purposes.

Bullies

Profile of a Bully:

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Profile of a Victim:

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Nip It in the Bud

With young children, watch for pre-bullying behaviors such as:

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As they grow and develop, bullies may develop the following characteristics:

- Often uses aggression to express anger.
- Good at testing limits and breaking the rules.
- Talk way out of a situation.
- Impatient, easily frustrated.

Watch and listen for physical/verbal bullying such as:

- Hitting/punching.
- Spreading rumors.
- Name-calling and teasing.
- Taunting.

Also, be sure to watch for signs that a child is being bullied and address them:

- Cries easily.
- Marked change in toileting or eating (more or less).
- Does not want to go to school.
- Bad dreams.

If a child has good emotional intelligence, you will notice:

- Heightened self-awareness.
- Better ability to manage the intensity of emotions.
- Increased sensitivity to how others feel.

This determines:

- Whether a child feels good in their world.
- How a child understands themself.
- How a child gets along with others.
Pathology and Evaluation of Childhood Aggression

Earlier, we considered different types of aggression defined by early childhood educators. Pediatricians tend to think of aggression in these terms:

*Proactive Aggression:*

*Reactive Aggression:*

*Maladaptive Aggression:*

A Sensitive Topic

Behavioral Disorders and Aggression

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

Examples of ODD behaviors include:

- Losing one’s temper a lot.
- Arguing with adults or refusing to comply with adults’ rules or requests.
- Often getting angry or being resentful or vindictive.
- Deliberately annoying others; easily becoming annoyed with others.
- Often blaming other people for one’s own mistakes or misbehavior.
Although the treatments are long-term and require the participation of the family and other professionals, there are some changes you can make and techniques you can implement that will help in the classroom.

- **Build on the positives, not the negatives:**

- **Use teachable moments to your advantage:**

- **Pick your battles:**

- **Take a break from the conflict:**

**Conduct Disorder (CD)**

Some common symptoms are:

- Persistent disregard for societal norms and other people’s rights, feelings, and personal space.
- Getting gratification out of aggression, deceit, or coercion.
- Lying for the sake of lying, stealing items of no apparent worth, relentless bullying, picking fights.

*Roughly 30% of children diagnosed with ODD in early childhood will*

Treatment for people with CD:

- Behavioral therapy involving the child’s entire family.
- Early diagnosis helps the success of the therapy.
- Family-child interaction therapy is used to teach families how to encourage desired behaviors and discourage disruptive ones.
- Possible medication depending on other conditions that might be present.

**Additional Strategies and Connecting with Families**

**Lowering Anxiety through Mindfulness**
Try This!

Calming Strategies

Encourage children to breathe deeply and stretch up high to alleviate stress and anxiety. Dr. Becky Bailey, Ph.D., an internationally recognized expert in childhood education and developmental psychology, suggests several calming strategies on her website www.consciousdiscipline.com that you could use to be more mindful and help reduce anxiety in children and yourself.

Try This!

Contracts and Goals

Let the child know the expected behavior and what is not. Work with the child to set goals and write a contract. Track the child’s behavior on a chart that is kept private between the teacher, family members, and child. Encourage family members to provide positive reinforcement such as a special treat or more time with a family member to enjoy a favorite activity or playing together.

Tips for Families

Coping with Defiance

The Child Mind Institute recommends you help families understand the ABCs of behavior management to help families cope with defiance by asking them to think about what came before the behavior and what came after it.

For example:

- **Antecedent:**

- **Behavior:**

- **Consequence:**

They recommend that these antecedents be avoided:

- **Do not assume expectations are understood.** Instead, spell out for the child exactly what the expectation is.
- **Do not call things out from a distance.** Instead, tell important instructions face-to-face, making them more likely to be remembered and understood.
- **Avoid transition without warning.** It is hard to transition, especially when the child is in the middle of something they are enjoying. So instead, give a warning that they need to stop so that they can find a stopping place.
- **Do not ask rapid-fire questions or give an extended series of instructions.** This limits the likelihood that a child will hear, answer questions, remember the tasks, and do what they have been instructed.

Lastly, they recommend embracing these antecedents:

- **Be aware of the situation.** Manage factors like hunger, fatigue, anxiety, or distractions to make it easier to reign in the behavior.
- **Adjust the environment.** Take distractions out of the environment if you want the child to focus on something specific, like homework. This would be hard to do with video games and toys readily available.
- **Make expectations clear.** Present information verbally, face-to-face, and clarify before you ask the child to do the task.
- **Provide countdowns for transitions.** Give warning of the amount of time before you expect the child to transition. For example, remind them when there are 2 minutes left, then make the transition at the stated time.
- **Give children a choice.** Giving a structured choice will let children have a say in their scheduling. For example, "Do you want to clean up your toys after lunch or before?" gives them the choice of when they want to clean up, not whether they want to clean up.

**Teaching Self-Control**

The Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families suggests the following strategies that can help families teach their children to manage their feelings and develop self-control:

- **Stay calm.** The calmer you are, the more quickly the child will calm down.
- **Recognize the child’s feelings or goals.** Let the child know you understand what they want to do, but depending on what it is, they may not be able to. For example, "You want to play on the swing set, and you are mad that you have to come in the house. It is okay to be mad, but it is not okay to hit me. Hitting hurts."
- **Offer alternatives.** Give the child other ways to reach the goal. For example, "You may not throw this ball in the house, but here is a sponge ball that you can toss inside."
- **Distraction.** Ignore the tantrum and point to something outside or pick up a book and start reading it. Eventually, the child will redirect attention to what you are doing.
- **Suggest ways to manage strong emotions.** For example, give suggestions like ripping up paper, jumping up and down, or hugging a stuffed animal when angry. This teaches healthy ways to express emotions.
- **Help the child take a break.** Find a safe, quiet place for the child to self-soothe and regain control. This is not a punishment. You can stay with the child and talk about the situation or let the child be alone if they choose.

**Never Give Up!**