



## NAVIGATING PRESCHOOL SOCIAL DYNAMICS

The preschool years are a time of tremendous growth in the social-emotional realm. Children of this age are beginning to define their social self, trying on different roles while navigating the conflicts and challenges that are a part of human relationships. This is a critical time to support your child by giving them tools to handle conflicts while also allowing your child the space and freedom to practice working things out themselves. Though it can be difficult to watch your child in either role (the aggressor or the victim), take solace in the fact that this is a very normal and critical stage of development. Children build the tools now to help them advocate for themselves the rest of their lives. Following are some tips for helping you navigate this new stage of your child's development.

### **Fantasy Play**

Play is the arena through which children process big emotions, try on different roles, and envision scenarios in which they have power and control when they feel as if they don't in their day to day life. As parents and educators, one of the most interesting albeit difficult stages of development is the emergence of violent fantasy play. This play can take on many forms but is often one of the first ways in which children process their emotions around concepts of good vs. evil, death, etc. During this critical stage of development it is important to observe the child's intent behind violent play and to find ways to engage, recognizing that they may need support processing those larger issues.

### **The Power of Language**

At this age children also begin to discover the power of language and the fact that certain words or phrases carry a lot of weight. The power struggles of toddler years that involved your child saying "no" have evolved into new ways to gain power, with strong language as one of the many tools to do so. Children experiment with language of exclusion ("you're not coming to my birthday party"), power ("I'm going to kill/hurt you"), or anger ("I hate you"). Though it may feel counter-intuitive, give as little attention to that language as possible. When we have big conversations or consequences for such language, it reinforces the power of these words. Instead, focus the conversation on the feelings that prompted those words, offering an alternative.

- "It sounds like you are frustrated that Sarah took your book. I wouldn't like that either! Why don't you tell her so she knows exactly *why* you are frustrated."
- "I understand that you are feeling so angry because I said we need to leave the park. You were having so much fun! Let's make sure to come back another day. It is okay to be disappointed; you can always tell me when you are feeling frustrated."
- "I can see that we are both feeling so frustrated and now you are using some very angry words. Let's both take some time and space to calm down in our own rooms and we can talk when you are calm enough to talk about how you are feeling."

## **Impulse Control**

It is important to remember that children of this age are still developing impulse control. Instead of giving extra attention to the times they were so overwhelmed and gave in to the urge to kick, push, scream, etc., try to focus on the positive times when they keep it together. This positive attention can set the tone and incentive for them to continue practicing these behaviors. It also helps to allow them to calm down, waiting for a neutral moment so that you can provide them with the appropriate tools for the next time.

## **When Your Child is the Victim**

It can be difficult to see a child who is wounded by a negative peer interaction, whether verbal or physical, and the desire to protect your child can be overwhelming. However, the most important thing we can do is help children learn to advocate for themselves, as conflicts will continue to occur throughout their lives. Most peer conflicts are two-sided, so it is also important to help your child take ownership if needed and learn how to recognize and avoid escalating social situations.

- “I bet that really hurt when Joe scratched you. I wonder what happened to make him so frustrated? Was there a reason he was so angry? What could you have done differently to avoid making him so upset?”

Place the focus on teaching your child what they can do when they are wronged instead of focusing on the other child's behavior. The most important thing to do in these situations is to teach your child how to resolve and avoid conflicts and to self-advocate.

We teach children multiple options for handling conflict that are practiced through role-playing scenarios in a neutral moment:

- Explain to the other child why they are upset using I statements:
  - “I'm so sorry to hear that Annie said she hates you; I'm sure that really hurt your feelings! What did you do when she said that? Next time you could tell her you didn't like that. Would you like to practice so you are ready next time someone uses unkind words?”
- Find an adult to help deescalate the situation.
- Walk away/get some space

Be sure to acknowledge it when your child handles a conflict with grace: “You told a teacher when someone was bothering you—you did the right thing!”

## **When Your Child is the Aggressor**

Possibly the only thing harder than watching your child be a victim is to see your child in the role of the aggressor. Though it can be difficult to see, trying on different roles is a normal part of childhood and a wonderful opportunity for your child to learn about kindness and empathy.

Remember to give most of the attention to the injured party; aggression of any kind should not be used as a way to give attention. Talk about how the other child might be feeling and help empathize. Most importantly, observe the root cause of the aggression. Was your child seeking power? Attention? Revenge? Help them identify those emotions and discuss alternative outlets:

- “I’m sure it really hurt his feelings when you told Christopher that he couldn’t come to your birthday party. Were you upset that he ate the last cracker? You could talk to him about how that made you feel so he knows why you were sad.”
- “It looks to me like Katie didn’t want to play dinosaurs. Look how scared her face is! I can tell she didn’t like it at all when you roared at her. Could you think of a different game you would both enjoy playing?”

### **Making Amends vs. Apologizing**

The beauty of children is that they live in the moment and are able to forgive and forget much easier than their adult counterparts. When children have a conflict we help them learn to make amends instead of forcing apologies. In this way children can learn to take ownership for their actions instead of simply saying “I’m sorry” and thinking that will fix anything. Furthermore, often children aren’t at all sorry—if someone took their shoes and they pushed them down but then got their shoes back they achieved their goal; saying “sorry” might feel forced or wrong. Instead, we must help the child see how and why their actions affect others.

- “Josh, I am so sorry that Laura kicked you. Is there something that Laura can do to make you feel better? An ice pack? A hug? Telling you that she is not going to do that again?”
- If a child is not ready to make amends we can model apologizing and making amends ourselves, giving them space to deescalate. When they are calm enough then we can go with them to check in on their friend.

### **A Note on Reacting**

Children are hardwired to experiment with different behaviors, exploring which give them the biggest reaction. Adults can unintentionally create patterns of behavior by giving too much attention to negative behaviors. In all situations, strive to put more time and energy teaching, modeling, and recognizing positive behaviors.

### **Resources for More Information:**

- [Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play](#) by Jane Katch
- [Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys](#) by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson
- [Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at Four](#) by Vivian Paley
- [Mom, They're Teasing Me](#) by Michael Thompson
- [The Montessori Toddler](#) by Simone Davis