

PORTLAND PEDIATRIC GROUP, LLP

Hitting

Hitting, pushing and grabbing toys are all ways that toddlers use to try to make contact with others, before they develop other social skills. Your son sounds like he is curious about other people. He has limited language and experience, so rather than walking up to someone and saying, "Excuse me. Can I play with you?," he shows his interest by smacking them. Subsequently, he discovers that he can get a reaction when he hits someone. He may even get two reactions, one from the person he hits and one from you. Even though the reactions probably aren't pleasant, he is intrigued by them.

Toddlers are fascinated with what they can make happen over and over and they are also curious about how people react in different situations. Hitting people satisfies both of these interests. Furthermore, toddlers see the world only from their own point of view and therefore don't understand that other people have different ideas and feelings than they do. "If hitting you is fun for me, I expect that it is fun for you, too." They are often very surprised at first when they hit, bite or push someone and that person cries. Sometime they continue to hit, just to see if they will get the same reaction every time and from different people.

Since they are fascinated with what they can make happen, they will repeat behaviors that cause certain predictable outcomes. These experiences can provide wonderful opportunities to learn. The frustrating thing for parents is that toddlers have to repeat behaviors numerous times before they can fully learn something. Here are some things that you can do to help your child learn positive ways to interact and also help keep other children safe in the meantime.

Model the behavior you want to teach. Often we are so surprised, scared, embarrassed or angry when our children hit that we intercede too roughly. This gives children a mixed message and also serves to make both children feel more tense and upset. Children will better learn from the interaction if you are calm, firm and gentle and use your words.

Give your child information and help interpret the response he is getting. Tell you son, "It hurts when you hit someone. Jessica is crying (pulling away) because she doesn't like to be hit."

Support the victim. Encourage the child who was hurt to speak up, to say, "No," or "Don't hurt me." Also, help your son make things right with the child he hurt. Maybe he can bring the other child some ice or a blanket or something else that will comfort him.

Offer your son an alternative. When your son hits someone, he has a good idea that he is trying to communicate. He may be trying to say, "Let's play," or "Hi!" or "Move over," or "Don't take my toy." If you can figure out what he is trying to say, you can redirect him to another way to say it. "If

you want to ask Jessica to play, you can say, 'Let's play,' or you can bring her a toy." "If you want Jessica to move, you can say, 'Move.'"

Supervise him closely when he is in situations where he is likely to hit and prevent any hits you can. If you stay close to your son, you may be able to offer him an alternative before he hits someone. If you see him approaching someone with his hand lifted, you can step in, gently hold his arm and remind him, "If you want to say 'Hi,' you can wave or blow a kiss." If you can reach him before he hits someone he is mad at, you can stop his arm, and say, "I'm going to stop you from hitting Timmy. If you are mad, you can tell him, 'I'm mad!'"

Learn to anticipate his behavior. If you stop a hit, he may be likely to try to hit again, soon. Stay close to ensure his success and to continue to offer him safer options. The more times he uses alternative methods of interacting, the better he learns them.

Choose situations where he is most likely to be successful. You may have observed that his hitting happens more in certain situations or with certain children. He may be sensitive to large groups and would be more able to control himself in a small consistent group of children. He may do better when he is outside than when he is inside. He may do better one-on-one with another child than in a group. He may be more likely to hit if he is tired or hungry. He may be successful with a group of kids for up to two hours, but after that, he begins to lose control. If you spend some time observing him and talking to other people who care for him, you may be able to get some clues about when and where he is most likely to be successful. Then you can try to arrange for him to be in those more successful circumstances.

Choose durable playmates and understanding parents. While your son is working on learning gentleness, it can reduce the stress on everyone if you spend most of your time with easy-going, active kids who don't take being hit too seriously. Spending time with parents who understand young children's clumsy attempts at being social, can help reduce your stress and sense of ostracism about your child's behavior.

You can remove him from a situation if he seems unable to be successful. If he has had several attempts, or hits in a certain situation, it may be that that situation is too difficult for him. If possible, remove him from the situation and/or take him home and let him try again another day.

It can take time. Because there is so much to figure out about people, feelings and appropriate behavior, toddlers don't learn these things fast. It may take a while for him to stop hitting. The exciting thing is that he is not just learning how to stop hitting, he is learning other, more successful ways to relate to and communicate with his peers. With your support, gentle, positive limits and encouragement, he will learn to be a social and compassionate person.