

# Aggressive Play in Toddlers and Preschool-aged Children

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*"Just as 5-year-olds who play doctor don't automatically go to medical school, violent games aren't a sign of a troubled mind" –Jane Katch, educator and author*

## Why does my child want *everything* to fight?

Most kids engage in aggressive play at some point in childhood (regardless of this being modeled or not). In fact, research has found it to be universal – both across cultures and animal species.

Aggressive play lets children work through their fear while maintaining some semblance of control. Whether they are the 'good' or the 'bad guy' in a scenario lets them react to something scary in a safe environment. For some kids, this is a safe way to practice breaking the rules. For others, it's a fun way to test limits and be creative.

## Should I make them stop?

Not necessarily. 'Aggressive play' is a type of cooperative role-playing with make-believe themes of aggression. Cooperative role-play in general is important as it teaches problem solving and social communication skills. When you add scary or violent themes, children also learn about empathy.

Practicing these skills as a small child may actually make for less aggressive high schoolers and adults. One study showed a correlation between convicted criminals and a lack of reported pretend play in their childhoods.

Ultimately, working through aggression in pretend scenarios leads to social competence when older.

## When is this truly a problem?

Aggressive play becomes problematic when it's repetitive and doesn't seem to have an end. For example, a toddler who repeatedly crashes all of his toys together. A related concern is aggression without a story line – either verbal or non-verbal.

More problematic would be violent play with a true intent to harm. This could take the form of bullying or physical assault.

## How can I help?

For a less verbal child, you can expand the play scene to include a simple plot line. In other words, add a few more steps to the play. If two toys crash, pick one up and pretend that it's crying. Your child can then offer a hug or a band-aid.

For an older kid, ask questions about what she is doing and why. These conversations are important for children to maximize the social-emotional benefits of aggressive play.

## What other ways can I teach emotional intelligence?

First, model how you as an adult are feeling by labeling your emotions with words. Explain *why* you feel the way you do. As is age-appropriate, be honest about when you feel sad or mad. This normalizes 'negative' emotions.

Then, label your child's emotions in a non-judgmental manner. Validate their 'negative' feelings instead of dismissing them or distracting them out of it by verbalizing understanding and compassion.

Further reading:

- <https://www.verywellfamily.com/tips-for-raising-an-emotionally-intelligent-child-4157946>
- <https://www.mother.ly/child/the-science-behind-play-fightingand-why-its-not-all-bad>
- <https://www.parents.com/kids/development/should-parents-be-concerned-about-violent-play/>

Resources:

- <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00483.x>
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S016230958790029X>
- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290334545\\_Young\\_Children's\\_Play\\_Fighting\\_and\\_Use\\_of\\_War\\_Toys](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290334545_Young_Children's_Play_Fighting_and_Use_of_War_Toys)