

Raising Children to Resist Violence

What You Can Do

Research has shown that violent or aggressive behavior is often learned early in life. However, parents, family members, and others who care for children can help them learn to deal with emotions without using violence. Parents and others can also take steps to reduce or minimize violence. This brochure is designed to help parents work within the family, school, and community to prevent and reduce youth violence.

Suggestions for Dealing With Children

Parents play a valuable role in reducing violence by raising children in safe and loving homes. Here are suggestions that can help. You may not be able to follow each one exactly, but if you do your best, it will make a difference in your children's lives.

Give your children consistent love and attention.

Every child needs a strong, loving relationship with a parent or other adult to feel safe and secure and to develop a sense of trust. Without a steady bond to a caring adult, a child is at risk for becoming hostile, difficult, and hard to manage. Behavior problems and delinquency are less likely to develop in children whose parents are involved in their lives, especially at an early age.

It's not easy to show love to a child all the time. It can be even harder if you are a young, inexperienced, or single parent, or if your child is sick or has special needs. If your baby seems unusually difficult to care for and comfort, discuss this with your child's pediatrician, another physician, a psychologist, or a counselor. He or she can give you advice and direct you to local parenting classes that teach positive ways to handle the difficulties of raising children.

It is important to remember that children have minds of their own. Their increasing independence sometimes leads them to behave in ways that disappoint, anger, or frustrate you. Patience and a willingness to view the situation through children's eyes, before reacting, can help you deal with your emotions. Do your best to avoid responding to your children with hostile words or actions.

Make sure your children are supervised.

Children depend on their parents and family members for encouragement, protection, and support as they learn to think for themselves. Without proper supervision, children do not receive the guidance they need. Studies report that unsupervised children often have behavior problems.

- Insist on knowing where your child is at all times and who their friends are. When you are unable to watch your children, ask someone you trust to watch them for you. Never leave young children home alone, even for a short time.
- Encourage your school-aged and older children to participate in supervised after-school activities such as sports teams, tutoring programs, or organized recreation. Enroll them in local community programs, especially those run by adults whose values you respect.

- Accompany your children to supervised play activities and watch how they get along with others. Teach your children how to respond appropriately when others use insults or threats or deal with anger by hitting. Explain to your children that these are not appropriate behaviors, and encourage them to avoid other children who behave that way.

Show your children appropriate behaviors by the way you act.

Children often learn by example. The behavior, values, and attitudes of parents and siblings have a strong influence on children. Values of respect, honesty, and pride in your family and heritage can be important sources of strength for children, especially if they are confronted with negative peer pressure, live in a violent neighborhood, or attend a rough school.

Most children sometimes act aggressively and may hit another person. Be firm with your children about the possible dangers of violent behavior. Remember also to praise your children when they solve problems constructively without violence. Children are more likely to repeat good behaviors when they are rewarded with attention and praise.

You can teach your children non-aggressive ways to solve problems by:

- Discussing problems with them,
- Asking them to consider what might happen if they use violence to solve problems, and
- Talking about what might happen if they solve problems without violence.

This kind of "thinking out loud" together will help children see that violence is not a helpful solution.

Parents sometimes encourage aggressive behavior without knowing it. For example, some parents think it is good for a boy to learn to fight. Teach your children that it is better to settle arguments with calm words, not fists, threats, or weapons.

Help your children learn constructive, nonviolent ways to enjoy their free time. Teach them your favorite games, hobbies, or sports, and help them develop their own talents and skills. Read stories to younger children, take older children to the library, or tell family stories about admired relatives who have made the world a better place.

Don't hit your children.

Hitting, slapping, or spanking children as punishment shows them that it's okay to hit others to solve problems and can train them to punish others in the same way they were punished.

Physical punishments stop unwanted behavior only for a short time. Even with very harsh punishment, children may adapt so that it has little or no effect. Using even more punishment is equally ineffective.

Nonphysical methods of discipline help children deal with their emotions and teach them nonviolent ways to solve problems. Here are some suggestions:

- Giving children “time out”—making children sit quietly, usually 1 minute for each year of age (this is not appropriate for very young children),
- Taking away certain privileges or treats, and
- “Grounding”—not allowing children to play with friends or take part in school or community activities (this is only appropriate for older children or adolescents).

Punishment that involves taking away privileges or “grounding” should be consistently applied for realistic, brief periods.

Children need to feel that if they make mistakes, they can correct them. Show them how to learn from their errors. Help them figure out what they did wrong and how they can avoid making similar mistakes in the future. It is especially important not to embarrass or humiliate your children at these times. Children always need to feel your love and respect.

A positive approach to changing behaviors is to emphasize rewards for good behavior instead of punishments for bad behavior. Remember that praise and affection are the best rewards.

Be consistent about rules and discipline.

When you make a rule, stick to it. Children need structure with clear expectations for their behavior. Setting rules and then not enforcing them is confusing and sets up children to “see what they can get away with.”

Parents should involve children in setting rules whenever possible. Explain to your children what you expect, and the consequences for not following the rules. This will help them learn to behave in ways that are good for them and for those around them.

Make sure your children do not have access to guns.

Guns and children can be a deadly combination. Teach your children about the dangers of firearms or other weapons if you own and use them. If you keep a gun in your home, unload it and lock it up separately from the bullets. Never store firearms, even if unloaded, in places where children can find them.

Don’t carry a gun or a weapon. If you do, this tells your children that using guns solves problems.

Try to keep your children from seeing violence in the home or community.

Violence in the home can be frightening and harmful to children. Children need a safe and loving home where they do not have to grow up in fear. Children who have seen violence at home do not always become violent, but they may be more likely to try to resolve conflicts with violence.

Work toward making home a safe, nonviolent place, and always discourage violent behavior between brothers and sisters. Keep in mind as well that hostile, aggressive arguments between parents frighten children and set a bad example for them.

If the people in your home physically or verbally hurt and abuse each other, get help from a psychologist or counselor in your community. He or she will help you and your family understand why violence at home occurs and how to stop it.

Sometimes children cannot avoid seeing violence in the street, at school, or at home, and they may need help in dealing with these frightening experiences. A psychologist or counselor at school or a religious leader are among those who can help them cope with their feelings.

Try to keep your children from seeing too much violence in the media.

Seeing a lot of violence on television, in the movies, and in video games can lead children to behave aggressively. As a parent, you can control the amount of violence your children see in the media.

Here are some ideas:

- Limit television viewing time to 1 to 2 hours a day.
- Make sure you know what TV shows your children watch, which movies they see, and what kinds of video games they play.
- Talk to your children about the violence that they see on TV shows, in the movies, and in video games. Help them understand how painful it would be in real life and the serious consequences for violent behaviors.
- Discuss with your children ways to solve problems without violence.

Teach your children ways to avoid becoming victims of violence.

It is important that you and your children learn to take precautions against becoming the victims of a violent crime. Here are some important steps that you can take to keep yourself and your children safe:

- Teach your children safe routes for walking in your neighborhood.
- Encourage them to walk with a friend at all times and only in well-lighted, busy areas.
- Stress how important it is for them to report any crimes or suspicious activities they see to you, a teacher, another trustworthy adult, or the police. Show them how to call 911 or the emergency service in your area.
- Make sure they know what to do if anyone tries to hurt them: Say “no,” run away, and tell a reliable adult.
- Stress the dangers of talking to strangers. Tell them never to open the door to or go anywhere with someone they don’t know and trust.

Help your children stand up against violence.

Support your children in standing up against violence. Teach them to respond with calm but firm words when others insult, threaten, or hit another person. Help them understand that it takes more courage and leadership to resist violence than to go along with it.

Help your children accept and get along with others from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Teach them that criticizing people because they are different is hurtful, and that name-calling is unacceptable. Make sure they understand that using words to start or encourage violence—or to quietly accept violent behavior—is harmful. Warn your child that bullying and threats can be a setup for violence.

An Extra Suggestion for Adults:

Take care of yourself and your community.

Stay involved with your friends, neighbors, and family. A network of friends can offer fun, practical help, and support when you have difficult times. Reducing stress and social isolation can help in raising your children.

Get involved in your community and get to know your neighbors. Try to make sure guns are not available in your area as well. Volunteer to help in your neighborhood’s anticrime efforts or in programs to make schools safer for children. If there are no programs like this nearby, help start one!

Let your elected officials know that preventing violence is important to you and your neighbors. Complain to television stations and advertisers who sponsor violent programs.

Encourage your children to get involved in groups that build pride in the community, such as those that organize cleanups of litter, graffiti, and run-down buildings. In addition to making the neighborhood a safer place, these groups provide a great opportunity for parents, children, and neighbors to spend time together in fun, safe, and rewarding activities.

Potential Warning Signs

Parents whose children show the signs listed below should discuss their concerns with a professional, who will help them understand their children and suggest ways to prevent violent behavior.

Warning Signs in the Toddler and Preschool Child:

- Has many temper tantrums in a single day or several lasting more than 15 minutes, and often cannot be calmed by parents, family members, or other caregivers;
- Has many aggressive outbursts, often for no reason;
- Is extremely active, impulsive, and fearless;
- Consistently refuses to follow directions and listen to adults;
- Does not seem attached to parents, for example, does not touch, look for, or return to parents in strange places;
- Frequently watches violence on television, engages in play that has violent themes, or is cruel toward other children.

Warning Signs in the School-aged Child:

- Has trouble paying attention and concentrating;
- Often disrupts classroom activities;
- Does poorly in school;
- Frequently gets into fights with other children in school;
- Reacts to disappointments, criticism, or teasing with extreme and intense anger, blame, or revenge;
- Watches many violent television shows and movies or plays a lot of violent video games;
- Has few friends, and is often rejected by other children because of his or her behavior;
- Makes friends with other children known to be unruly or aggressive;
- Consistently does not listen to adults;
- Is not sensitive to the feelings of others;
- Is cruel or violent toward pets or other animals;
- Is easily frustrated.

Warning Signs in the Preteen or Teenaged Adolescent:

- Consistently does not listen to authority figures;
- Pays no attention to the feelings or rights of others;
- Mistreats people and seems to rely on physical violence or threats of violence to solve problems;
- Often expresses the feeling that life has treated him or her unfairly;
- Does poorly in school and often skips class;
- Misses school frequently for no identifiable reason;
- Gets suspended from or drops out of school;
- Joins a gang, gets involved in fighting, stealing, or destroying property;
- Drinks alcohol and/or uses inhalants or drugs.

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This information should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care or consultation. Based on individual facts and circumstances, a psychologist or pediatrician may recommend varied approaches to child-rearing and violence prevention or treatment options for serious or chronic problems.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 57,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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