

Tip Sheet

How Should My Young Child Behave at School? How Can I Help?

Children who have good social skills find it easier to adjust to school or preschool. And children who adjust more easily are likely to be more successful in school. But how can parents help children with social skills or with behavior that is acceptable? Three very common behavior difficulties that young children have are:

1. Aggression (hitting, pushing, biting, etc.)
2. Difficulty sitting still to listen to the teacher, and
3. Separation anxiety (child is very upset at being left by his or her parent).

Aggression



Almost all children, girls and boys, hit or push other children at some time in the early childhood years. In fact, two-year-old girls hit others just as much as two-year-old boys. By three, though, it is mostly boys who are aggressive. It is best to stay calm when your child hits or hurts others. Let him know that he may not hit. Do not allow a child to get what he or she wants by hitting or hurting. If he hits to get a toy from a friend, calmly take away the toy and tell him to use words. If he does not understand, you can give him the words to say. Tell him to ask his friend, "Please may I have the truck?" His friend is allowed to say yes or no. If he says yes, be sure your child says thank you. If he says no, then ask his friend to let you know when he is done with the toy so your child can play with it. You may need to do this many times before your little one stops hitting. **Do not worry.** This kind of behavior is normal and will go away with patience. The important thing is to stay calm. **Never** hit a child to stop aggressive behavior (it doesn't work) and **never** bite a child to show them what biting feels like. Biting is normal in toddlers and will also stop with time. Give a biting child a teething toy and, as with hitting, do not allow her to get what she wants by biting.



The Very Active Child

If your child is new to school or preschool she may never have been asked to sit and listen. As with minor hitting and aggression, it is normal for a child to have trouble sitting still. This is a skill she needs to learn. And some children are naturally more active than others. You can help by practicing these skills at home. Set a regular daily time to read together. Encourage your child to listen and allow her to ask questions. Explain that you will be sitting down for 5 minutes or 10 minutes (no more than 10 minutes, at first); then she will be able to get up and play. You may need to start with just a few minutes and gradually increase the time. Be sure to make it interesting; **never** make reading a punishment. Choose books that she is interested in and read in a lively voice. You can also sit down and color or do puzzles with your child. You don't need to reward your child for sitting still except by praising her. This special time with Mom or Dad is rewarding enough. Be sure your active child is getting enough time to play outside. Go for walks or bike rides together and spend time at the playground. If she has lots of energy early in the morning, plan for a stop at the park on the way to school to run off some of that energy. Or have her do jumping jacks on the walk to school. She will be able to sit more easily if she has had a chance to move around. You may want to look carefully at her diet also and be sure she is staying away from sugary snacks that can make some children overactive.



Separation Anxiety

Some children find it very difficult to separate from their parents. Even some children who have had lots of experience mixing with adults and other children may feel anxious and may cry when left at school. If you know your child has anxieties about being left, talk to him ahead of time about school, and visit the school with him at least once before he is due to start. Talk to the teacher to see if you can stay for an hour or two on the first day of school. Tell your child exactly what will happen. Tell him that you will stay for an hour (or ten minutes) and then you will leave. Tell him when you will be back. Give him an event in the day that he can know by, such as right after snack time or at nap-time. He may still cry when you leave, but he will have a time to look forward to when he knows you will return. Be sure to come back exactly when you said you would. On the way to school each day talk about all the fun things he will be doing. Show him that you are excited that he gets to go to school. Most children overcome their fears in a few days, and soon begin to feel safe and secure. If your child continues to cry when you leave, talk to the teachers to see if his tears continue after you leave. While it is hard to keep your own emotions under control when your child is sad, try to act in a very positive way so your child knows that school is a good place.



Always encourage your children...

with praise and kind words to instill good behaviors. Never use harsh words to discipline—these only frighten and confuse children. Talk with them about all the exciting things they will do and learn at school. Ask them what they did each day, and talk with their teachers to get to know more about their class and their activities. If you are interested in their school, they will be too. If you remind them gently and firmly that they must listen to their teachers, they soon will start to act in ways that will make learning easy and fun.

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