



Illustration by  
Billy Nuñez, age 16

# YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN A LOT WHEN THEY PLAY

## PLAYING WITH OTHERS IS IMPORTANT CHILD'S WORK

- Support play by making your home a good place to play.
- Teach the skills needed to play well with others.
- Learning to play well with others is not a one-time lesson. It takes time and practice.
- Important life skills are learned when children play. These skills will help them make and keep friends.

**W**hen young children play with children close to their own age, they learn:

- How to cooperate
- When to lead and when to follow
- How to solve problems

## CREATE PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

**Invite other children to your home  
or to play in the neighborhood park.**

- The first visit needs to be short (about 1 hour) and is best with only one other child.
- Plan to end before everyone gets too tired.
- Know how to contact the other child's parent.

**Go to another child's home.**

- For the first visit, you may want to stay until you know your child is comfortable being there without you.
- Get to know the other child's parents. You might be able to help each other out!

**Join an organized play group.**

- When playing without parents, children do best with a small number of children.

**Find out with whom your child likes to play.**

- For children in child care, preschool, and play groups, invite a friend to your house or to the park.

## MAKE YOUR HOME A GOOD PLACE TO PLAY

- Plan ahead. Avoid things like superhero dress-up clothes and toy guns that encourage aggressive play.
- Find out what your visitor enjoys. Ask your child what activities the friend enjoys. Playtime will be more fun, and this teaches your child to be thoughtful.
- Have enough items for everyone. If there aren't enough, suggest another activity.
- Your child's "favorite thing" does not need to be shared. Let your child put away a few things that are off limits.
- Make your home a safe place. Poisons need to be locked away. Homes without guns are the safest. But if there are guns, they need to be stored locked and unloaded; bullets need to be stored in another locked place.
- Do not overplan. Just set the stage with materials and ideas. Let the children use their creativity and imaginations!

Help the children with some activities, like cutting out shapes for arts and crafts, and keep an eye on them at all times. For the most part, it is better if you only get involved when they need your help. Give them a chance to resolve differences on their own.



## TEACH YOUR CHILD TO BE A GOOD PLAYMATE

Before, during, and after your child plays with other children, talk about how to get along with others.

### Set a few simple and very specific rules.

- “People are not for hitting.”
- “We do not grab toys from other children.”



### Help your child express likes, dislikes, and desires with words. Review what to say.

- “I like to paint on the easel.”
- “I do not like to...”
- “I want to be a firefighter.”

### Show your child how to solve problems. Explain why something is not possible and offer other choices.

- “Tell Julie you don’t like to be pushed on the swing. Maybe you would both like to ride on the seesaw instead.”

### Notice and praise the children for things that went well.

- “I really liked the way you remembered to take turns with the watering can.”
- “It was great to hear you using your polite words!”

## AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IS NORMAL

Since it is hard for young children to understand someone else’s point of view, there will be some arguments. Young children react to the moment and may do things without thinking.

Aggressive behavior is often not meant to be hostile or to hurt others. In fact, young children frequently get upset when another child gets hurt while playing.

When something happens that is upsetting, talk with everyone. Help each child try to see the other child’s point of view. This way, children will learn how to avoid and deal with arguments.

If you are concerned about your child’s aggressive behavior, talk to your pediatrician.

## TIPS ON REDUCING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

### Provide the right amount of space.

A small number of children in a very large space, or a large number of children in a small space, tends to increase aggressive play. Have the right amount of space to avoid conflicts.

### Plan how to respond in a positive way.

It’s easier to guide children to good behavior instead of telling them what not to do. “I will be right here; come and tell me if you need my help.”

### Redirect behaviors like pushing, hitting, or taking someone else’s toys to a more positive activity.

Often, this means it’s time for a new activity. “We don’t grab toys; we share toys. It looks like you’re done with that truck for now. Here are some paper and markers for you.”

### Teach children to use words to express feelings, desires, and needs.

A child’s first reaction is usually “physical,” so this may be difficult to learn. With words, children learn how to solve their own problems. Teach your child to say something like, “I don’t like that. Grabbing my toy makes me mad. Please give it back.”

### Assume a child does something for a good reason, even if the action is not nice.

What looks aggressive, like grabbing toys from others, may be a child’s attempt to join in with others. Teach children to take turns rather than get mad at them for grabbing toys.

### Pay attention to basic comfort and needs.

Conflicts are more likely to happen when children are too hot, too cold, hungry, or tired!



## DEALING WITH REJECTION

Playtime can be fun or difficult. Either way, children will learn a lot when they play!

At some point, your child will feel rejected by other children. Everyone does and it's painful. You cannot avoid hurtful situations, but you can provide support and love when problems occur.

Teach your child how to try again. Trying again is an important life lesson on how to respect and get along with others. Focus on teaching all the children involved how to get along and not on finding out who was right and who was wrong.

## Your positive attitude is very important when your child is having a hard time.

Help your child understand why another child might not want to play when or what your child does.

- "Jenny doesn't want to play, but maybe Emma does. Why don't you ask her?"
- "I wonder if José would rather paint than play ball."

**It is easier for young children to take turns than to play with a toy at the same time!**

Connected Kids are Safe, Strong, and Secure

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.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 66,000 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.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2001-JN-FX-0011 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

HE50388

Graphic design and illustrations by Artists For Humanity, a non profit arts and entrepreneurship program for Boston teens.

American Academy  
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™