



Navigating Preschool Social Dynamics

The preschool years are a time of tremendous growth in the social-emotional realm. Children of this age are beginning to define their social self, trying on different roles while navigating the conflicts and challenges that are a part of human relationships. This is a critical time to support your child by giving them tools to handle conflicts while also allowing your child the space and freedom to practice working things out themselves. Though it can be difficult to watch your child in either role (the aggressor or the victim), take solace in the fact that this is a very normal stage of development. Children build the tools now to help them advocate for themselves.

Fantasy Play

Through play, children process big emotions, try on different roles, and envision scenarios in which they have power and control when they feel as if they don't in their day to day life. As parents and educators, one of the most interesting and difficult stages of development is the emergence of violent fantasy play. This play can take on many forms but is often one of the first ways in which children process their emotions around concepts of good vs. evil, death, etc. During this critical stage of development it is important to observe the child's intent behind violent play and to find ways to engage, recognizing that they may need support processing those larger issues.

The Power of Language

At this age children also begin to discover the power of language and the fact that certain words or phrases carry a lot of weight. The toddler years, saying "no" have evolved into new ways to gain power. Children experiment with language of **exclusion** ("you're not coming to my birthday party"), **power** ("I'm going to kill/hurt you"), or **anger** ("I hate you"). Though it may feel counter-intuitive, give as little attention to that language as possible. When we have big conversations for such language, it reinforces the power of these words. Instead, focus the conversation on the feelings that prompted those words, offering an alternative.

- "It sounds like you are frustrated that Sarah took your book. I wouldn't like that either. Why don't you tell her, don't take my book!"
- "I understand that you are feeling angry about leaving the park. You were having so much fun! Let's make sure to come back another day. It is okay to be disappointed; you can always tell me when you are feeling angry."
- "I can see that we are both feeling frustrated and now you are using some very angry words. Let's both take some time and space to calm down in our own rooms and we can talk when we are calm enough."

Impulse Control

Children of this age are still developing impulse control. Instead of giving extra attention at times he/she felt overwhelmed and gave in to the urge to kick, push, scream, etc., try to focus on the positive times when your child kept

it together. This positive attention can set the tone and incentive to continue practicing these behaviors. It also helps to allow him/her to calm down, waiting for a calm moment so that you can provide the appropriate tools for next time.

When Your Child is the Victim

It can be difficult to see your child wounded by a negative peer interaction, whether verbal or physical, and the desire to protect your child can be overwhelming. However, the most important thing we can do is help children learn to advocate for themselves, as conflicts will continue to occur throughout their lives. Most peer conflicts are two-sided, so it is also important to help your child take ownership if needed and learn how to recognize and avoid escalating social situations.

- “I bet that really hurt when Joe scratched you. I wonder what happened to make him so frustrated? Was there a reason he was so angry? What could you have done differently to avoid making him so upset?”

Place the focus on teaching your child what they can do when they are wronged instead of focusing on the other child’s behavior. The most important thing to do in these situations is to teach your child how to resolve and avoid conflicts and to self-advocate.

We teach children options for handling conflict and practice through role-playing in a calm moment:

- “I’m so sorry to hear that Annie said she hates you; I’m sure that really hurt your feelings. What did you do when she said that? Next time you can tell her those words are hurtful. Would you like to practice so you are ready next time someone uses unkind words?”
- Find an adult to help deescalate the situation.
- Walk away/get some space.

Be sure to acknowledge when your child handles a conflict with grace: “You told a teacher when someone was bothering you—you did the right thing!”

When Your Child is the Aggressor

Possibly the only thing harder than watching your child be a victim is to see your child in the role of the aggressor. Though it can be difficult, trying on different roles is a normal part of childhood and an opportunity for your child to learn about kindness and empathy. Remember to give most of the attention to the injured party; aggression of any kind should not be used as a way to give attention. Talk about how the other child might be feeling and teach compassion. Most importantly, observe the root cause of the aggression. Was your child seeking power? Attention? Revenge? Help them identify those emotions and discuss alternative outlets:

- “I’m sure it really hurt his feelings when you told Christopher that he couldn’t come to your birthday party. Were you upset that he ate the last cracker? You could talk to him about how that made you feel so he knows why you were sad.”
- “It looks to me like Katie didn’t want to play dinosaurs. Look how scared her face is. I can tell she didn’t like it at all when you roared at her. Could you think of a different game you would both enjoy playing?”

Making Amends vs. Apologizing

The beauty of children is that they live in the moment and are able to forgive and forget much easier than adults. When children have a conflict, we help them learn to make amends instead of forcing apologies. In this way children can learn to take ownership for their actions instead of simply saying “I’m sorry” and thinking that will fix everything. Furthermore, children aren’t at all sorry—if someone took their shoes and so in turn they pushed them down and got their shoes back, they achieved their goal; saying “sorry” might feel forced or wrong. Instead, we must help the child see how their actions affect others.

- “Josh, I am so sorry that Laura kicked you. Is there something that Laura can do to make you feel better? An ice pack? Telling you that she is not going to do that again?”
- If a child is not ready to make amends, the adult can model compassion and make amends instead, giving the child time to deescalate. When they are calm enough then we can go with them to check in on their friend.

A Note on Reacting

Children are hardwired to experiment with different behaviors, exploring which give them the biggest reaction. Adults can unintentionally create patterns of behavior by giving too much attention to negative behaviors. In all situations, strive to put more time and energy teaching, modeling, and recognizing positive behaviors.

Resources:

- Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play by Jane Katch
- Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson
- Bad Guys Don’t Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at Four by Vivian Paley
- Mom, They’re Teasing Me by Michael Thompson
- The Montessori Toddler by Simone Davis