



Does your child become aggressive when something doesn't go his/her way?

Do you see your child hitting, kicking, biting, or destroying property?

Do you hear them swearing, screaming, uttering aggressive or threatening statements?

The information in this pamphlet will guide you towards a better understanding of your child's aggressive behaviour and the circumstances that surround it.

## What is aggression?

Aggression is defined as hostile or violent behaviour or attitudes toward another person, item, or animal. A readiness to attack or confront. (Oxford University Press, 2024).



## Why Does it happen?

- It works! It helps to get your child what they do or do not want.
- Your child likely lacks the skills needed to regulate strong emotions, such as fear, anxiety, exhaustion or anger.
- Your child has a limited ability to verbally communicate their thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and emotions (Sick Kids, n.d.).

## What Does it look like?

- **Verbal Aggression:** hostile words used to insult, threaten, or intimidate.
- **Physical Aggression:** physical contact initiated by one person to another which results in physical harm.
- **Indirect Aggression:** a more complex form of aggression that involves attempting to harm others by spreading rumours to humiliate, demean, or exclude a victim from a group (Tremblay et al., 2008).

Aggression may be occurring for medical reasons, especially if the behaviours are intense, impulsive and triggers are difficult to determine. To rule out medical reasons discuss your concerns with your family physician.

# The Functions of Behaviour

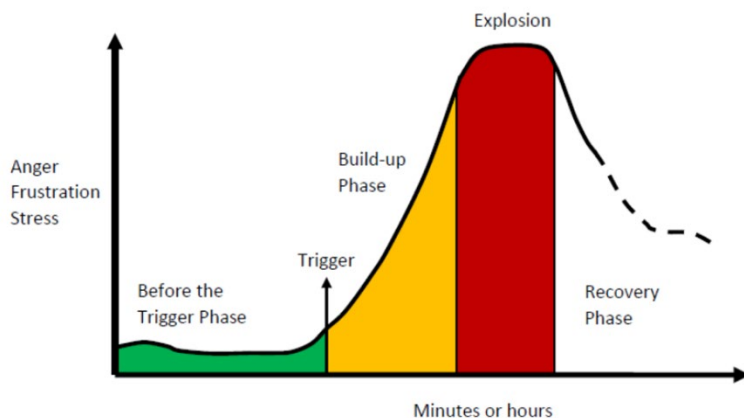
All behaviour serves a purpose, a reason why it happens. It has a goal or a function. All behaviour happens in order to gain access to something your child wants, or to escape something that your child does not want. To help remember what the functions of behaviour are, use the acronym **SEAT**, for **S**ensory or self-stimulatory, **E**scape, **A**ttention, and **T**angible. Knowing what the function (goal) of the aggressive behaviour is will help you determine how best to decrease future occurrences.

- **Sensory/Self-stimulatory:** Also called the “physical” function. Behaviour occurs to fulfill an internal need or want, e.g., scratching itchy skin.
- **Escape Function:** Behaviour occurs to escape people, places, or demands, e.g., running out of a noisy room.
- **Attention** (positive or negative) function: Behaviour occurs to gain attention from peers/caregivers, e.g., calling out someone’s name repeatedly.
- **Tangible** function: Behaviour occurs to gain access to items or activities in the environment, e.g., pushing a peer to get their toy (Cooper et al., 2019).



## The Escalation Process

Fluctuations in your child’s mood throughout the day are normal. Depending on the circumstances that face them in the moment, your child will move back and forth throughout the phases. Some circumstances might trigger a minor escalation into the build up phase while other circumstances might trigger a more significant escalation into the explosion phase.



When your child engages in behaviour, it’s likely they follow a similar pattern each time. This diagram outlines the possible phases that your child might go through during a behaviour escalation.

When creating a plan on how to respond to aggressive behaviour, it is important to first identify what triggers the change in

behaviour and what the very early physical signs of escalation are. Your response to the behaviour would be dependent on the specific strategies that are proven effective in helping your child return back to a calm state (Cook & Browning, 2024).

# The Behaviour Investigation

Take some time to watch what is happening with your child's behaviour.

- Record how often, how severe and how long each behaviour episode is. This identifies your starting point.
- Record what happens immediately before you see any behaviour escalation (e.g. Did you tell your child they couldn't have something?). This helps to identify triggers. Escape
- Record what happens right after your child engages in the behaviour (e.g. Did you end up giving the item to your child?). This helps identify how the behaviour works to get your child what they want (Dunn Buron, 2022; Kearney, 2008; Kuypers, 2011).

Level / Zone	Known Triggers	What it looks like	What to do
Red Zone (Explosion)			
Yellow Zone (Build up)			
Green Zone (Before the Trigger)			

## Creating the Behaviour Plan

Similar to the phases of escalation, your behaviour plan should consist of three levels of escalation that vary in degrees of severity.



- The **Green Zone** – your child's ideal state. Your child is calm and content.
- The **Yellow Zone** – your child's state of very early behaviour escalation. Something has triggered your child's heightened behaviour.
- The **Red Zone** – your child's state of high behaviour escalation. Aggression is observed.

Your plan should also identify the triggers that move your child between zones and the strategies that work to de-escalate your child's behaviour back down to the Green Zone (Bothman, 2021).

## Behaviour Escalation Phases

**Zone/Phase:** Red Zone (Explosion Phase)

**Triggers:** Environmental, social, internal factors that trigger your child's highest level of behaviour escalation (Bothman, 2021; Dana & Yogeetha, 2021). E.g., A peer took a toy from them, they were told "no", etc.

**What it looks like:** Extreme behaviour. Physical, verbal aggression and/or property destruction is happening (Bothman, 2021). E.g., Biting, breaking toys, throwing, scratching, etc.

**What to do:** Too late to intervene with effective calming, or teaching strategies. Focus on keeping yourself, your child, others, and property safe. Let your child release their emotions. Assess and intervene when calm (Bothman, 2021).

**Zone/Phase:** Yellow Zone (Build-Up Phase)

**Triggers:** Environmental, social, internal factors that trigger early physical changes in behaviour. Things that set the stage for behaviour to occur (Bothman, 2021; Dana and Yogeetha, 2021). E.g., They had a poor sleep or they are hungry, it is raining and they can not go outside, the environment is noisy, their favourite teacher is away, etc.

**What it looks like:** The very subtle physical changes in your child's behaviour. E.g., changes in breathing, communication (they get quiet or they start to speak faster/louder, begin asking a lot of questions), clenched fists, pacing, etc. Signs are so early that your child might not be aware they have stepped out of the Green Zone (Bothman, 2021).

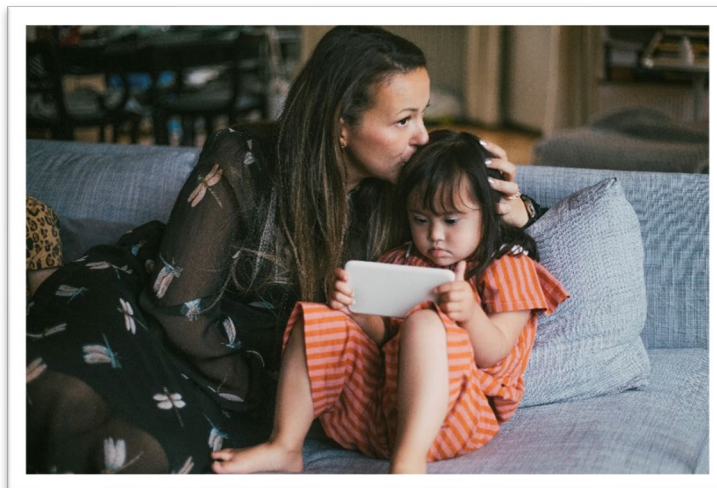
**What to do:** Removal of the stressor (if possible). Implement strategies that can help de-escalate your child's behaviour (e.g., deep breathing, engagement in preferred activities to redirect their attention, change in environment etc.). Help your child to engage in the new replacement behaviour they have been working on learning in the Green Zone (Bothman, 2021).

**Zone/Phase:** Green Zone (Before the Trigger Phase)

**Triggers:** Environmental, social, internal factors that help your child feel calm and content. Things that help your child return to a calm and content state after behaviour escalation (Bothman, 2021; Dana and Yogeetha, 2021).

**What it looks like:** The physical signs that your child is in a calm and content state (e.g. normal voice tone and volume, cooperative, verbal communication is intact, able to remain at an activity, etc.; Bothman, 2021).

**What to do:** Implement strategies that are effective in keeping your child in a calm and content state (e.g. attention for appropriate behaviour, busy with preferred activities, well fed/rested; Bothman, 2021). This is the time to teach your child the skills that they can use to get what they want rather than using aggression (e.g. verbal statements, tolerating "no", waiting, or taking turns etc.; Sick Kids, n.d.).





# Things to Consider when Attempting to Decrease Aggressive Behaviour

The most effective behaviour plan should be implemented confidently and consistently among all caregivers and in all environments. The more consistent the implementation of the plan when responding to your child's aggressive behaviour is, the more likely you will see positive behaviour change over time.



- Model appropriate reactions to stressful situations. You are your child's biggest role model. Your child is highly likely to engage in the behaviours that they see you do. (e.g., If you are an aggressive person, chances are high that your child will be as well; Surrey Place, 2023).
- Teach your child to be less impulsive. For example, if they are likely to lunge at someone when a trigger occurs, teach them to: stop, take a step back from the stressor, take three deep breaths, squeeze their hands together, think of what to say, say it, and/or get help from an adult if their words don't work.
- Your child engages in aggressive behaviour simply because it is working to help them get what they want or to avoid what they do not want. If the aggressive behaviour does not work, overtime, you should see a significant decrease in aggressive behaviour because it does not help your child to reach their goal (Kearney, 2008).

## The Planned Ignoring Strategy

Using this strategy does not mean that you should ignore your child, just the inappropriate behaviour. The 'ignoring' aspect of this strategy has to be planned and consistent.

- Make a short statement of the behaviour expectation (e.g., "First safe hands and feet, then play.").
- Remove all of your attention from the behaviour, including both verbal and non-verbal responses (e.g., verbal statements about the behaviour, eye contact, and/or physical contact).
- Stay calm and in control of your own feelings and actions.
- Be sure that other people are not giving attention to the behaviour.
- Provide your child with attention only after appropriate behaviour (Child Mind Institute, 2023).



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## Additional resources

- Sick Kids – Garry Hurvitz Centre for Community Mental Health <https://sickkidscmh.ca/children-families/>
- Surrey Place <https://www.surreyplace.ca/resources/>

## Disclaimer

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