



Aggression and bullying in early childhood



ECE resources

The research review [What is bullying?](#) outlines the four essential characteristics that define bullying – it is mean and hurtful, persistent and ongoing, intended to cause harm, and involves a real or perceived power imbalance - with some concrete examples of bullying behaviours. Bullying behaviours can be seen across all developmental stages. However, what bullying looks like during early childhood is quite different compared with older children. This resource helps to illustrate how bullying develops in early childhood and how to spot it, activities and strategies to prevent bullying from occurring, and effective ways to address bullying when there is a need for intervention.

Activity: What might bullying look like, sound like, and feel like in early childhood?

Can young children really engage in bullying behaviours with the intent to cause harm to another peer? What are your thoughts?

The purpose of this activity is to reflect on your attitudes and beliefs about young children's ability to engage in bullying behaviours. If you don't believe that young children can engage in bullying behaviour, then you're less likely to notice it or stop it. You might like to have a kōrero with your colleagues and discuss their thoughts. Discussing your perceptions and attitudes towards bullying will help your ECE setting come to a common definition and approach to understanding and responding to bullying.

The purpose of this activity is to reflect on your attitudes and beliefs about young children's ability to engage in bullying behaviours. If you don't believe that young children can engage in bullying behaviour, then you're less likely to notice it or stop it. You might like to have a kōrero with your colleagues and discuss their thoughts. Discussing your perceptions and attitudes towards bullying will help your ECE setting come to a common definition and approach to understanding and responding to bullying.

Bullying in early childhood

Researchers are becoming increasingly interested in bullying behaviours used by very young children. This is because previously early childhood has been thought to represent a developmental period where children are still learning acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour. You might have heard other adults dismiss bullying behaviours by saying things like 'kids will be kids' or 'they'll grow out of it'. It is not uncommon for some teachers to overlook bullying because they think children are too immature, innocent, or incapable of using deliberate harmful behaviours. While these perceptions can be true, there is now substantial evidence¹ that shows children as young as three can engage in aggressive behaviours that meet the four essential characteristics that define bullying, and that these are not considered typical, developmentally appropriate behaviours. As young children's behaviours become more challenging and complex, teachers and parents are becoming more concerned about preventing the emergence of bullying.

Bullying can emerge in children as young as three and we're likely to see bullying to occur in preschools, kindergartens, playgroups, childcare, and any other social context where children interact (such as home, extended family gatherings etc.).

Aggression versus bullying

Unlike bullying, aggression can be fairly typical and at times, developmentally appropriate during early childhood. As children develop their language, social, and self-regulatory skills, aggression typically decreases and is replaced with more appropriate behaviours. Aggression and bullying are overlapping but distinctive behaviours. **All bullying behaviour is aggression but not all aggression is bullying.** To be defined as bullying, aggressive behaviour needs to be mean and harmful, repeated, intentional, and there must be an imbalance of power.

Activity: If you've observed bullying in your ECE setting, write down the scenario. Does the behaviour described in your scenario include the four bullying characteristics? Have your perceptions of bullying and aggression changed?

The purpose of this activity is to get you thinking about whether the behaviours you've been labelling as bullying are indeed bullying, or are they more reflective of aggression? Incorrectly labelling behaviours as bullying (and children as bullies) can lead to serious and inaccurate stigmatisation. Similarly, dismissing bullying behaviours as typical development can contribute to children's ongoing use of these behaviours.

Young children don't just develop bullying behaviours. There are several situations and contexts where young children can learn bullying behaviours. For example, they may observe or be the target of bullying at home between siblings, from other family members, or from within the neighbourhood; they may watch television shows, movies, or video games that have a high level of aggression and bullying; or they may see other peers use bullying behaviours to get what they want. These experiences and observations can prepare young children to be more or less likely to use bullying behaviours.

Young children's **bullying behaviours can be reinforced by the reaction of others.** Consider this scenario: a child is playing with a toy and another child comes over and demands to play with the toy. The targeted child sits crying and reluctantly hands over the toy to the child. The aggressive child is likely to target the same child again in the future and the bullying behaviour may continue and escalate. The submission of the target child has reinforced the aggressive child's behaviour because the child has achieved their goal of playing with the toy. If this behaviour is allowed to continue, the aggressive child's behaviour will continue to be reinforced and the behaviour may become more hurtful and deliberate.

During early childhood, **modelling is an incredibly powerful way young children learn positive and negative behaviours,** including bullying. When children observe their peers participating in bullying behaviours, they may try out similar tactics. They may target the same child who had been victimised, perceiving them as an 'easy target' to get what they want. Without intervention, this early engagement in bullying can escalate and several months later there may well established power hierarchies and dominant children who continue to regularly bully their peers.

How can teachers spot bullying?

[What is bullying?](#) described some examples of bullying behaviours that children and adults use. This includes physical, verbal, relational, and cyber bullying. During early childhood, physical aggression (such as hitting, kicking, pinching, or throwing objects) is the most common aggressive behaviour children use. Physical aggression usually peaks at approximately 4 years of age and slowly declines as young children develop language, social, and self-regulation skills. Relational aggression, such as excluding a peer from play by saying 'you can't play' with the intention to exclude, and ignoring or whispering about another peer, are also common examples of aggression that could lead to bullying. As children get older and their

language develops, they are also likely to use verbal forms of aggression such as threatening to hurt other children, yelling and swearing at others.

Activity: Write a list of behaviours that you would classify as bullying behaviours.

The purpose of this activity is for you to consider the different types of bullying behaviours that young children use. Are there behaviours that are more common than others? Do you consider each of the behaviours to be equally serious? Share your list with your colleagues to see whether there are similarities and differences in your perceptions.

Young children can use each of these forms of aggression, and each has the potential to escalate into bullying. By being aware of these behaviours, teachers can more effectively prevent and stop the behaviours from occurring and escalating. Remember that one child can use all forms of aggression: physical aggression isn't exclusively a boy behaviour and relational aggression isn't exclusively a girl behaviour. All children can learn how to use all forms of aggression and bullying.

Who is involved in bullying behaviours?

Usually, our attention is immediately drawn to the child who has engaged in the bullying behaviour, but the victim and the bystanders also play an important role in a bullying situation. The actions of the bully, victim, and bystander(s) can either stop or escalate the bullying behaviours.

The bully is the child who targets another child and instigates the bullying behaviour.

The victim is the child who is the receiver of the bullying behaviour.

The bystander is the adult, child or children who watch the bullying behaviour occur.

All children can be a bully, a victim, or a bystander and they can move between these roles.

How can we prevent bullying?

Bullying is completely preventable and the great news is that preventing bullying during early childhood is a lot easier compared with middle childhood and adolescence because children are still learning about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Young children are likely to try out new behaviours, wait to see how their peers and teachers react, and then decide whether the behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable. This allows teachers to intervene before aggressive behaviours escalate into bullying. It is better to intervene too early than too late². The following considerations will help ECE leaders and teachers to develop a consistent approach to preventing bullying:

1. Recognise that young children can engage in bullying behaviours. These may start as aggression and escalate to behaviours that are repetitive and where the bully is more powerful than the victim.
2. Become familiar with the different forms of aggression and bullying that young children use during early childhood. All of these forms of aggression and bullying are harmful.
3. Understand why some children may engage in bullying behaviours and where they have learnt these behaviours. All behaviour is communication and serves some function.
4. Remember that bullies, victims, and bystanders are all important to the prevention and intervention of bullying behaviours.

5. Talk to children and parents/whānau about bullying. Young children don't always understand that their bullying behaviours hurt and children don't always know what to do when they see bullying behaviour happen. Talking about aggression and bullying openly with children and parents/whānau will help establish expectations of behaviour and let them know that bullying will be taken seriously.
6. Look for teachable moments to teach children how to recognise and respond to bullying behaviours. This will help establish a culture in your centre that says 'NO!' to bullying.
7. Teach and model the skills children need to engage in prosocial, cooperative, and supportive interactions. Teachers are in a privileged position to guide children to become kind and sociable individuals.
8. Prevention is a collective commitment to all children's safety and sense of belonging. It is important that all teachers and parents/whānau are aware of the centre's philosophy and approach to preventing bullying. It's best that everyone is consistent in responding and intervening in all bullying behaviours.

How to prevent aggression and bullying

- Below is a list of practical strategies, activities, and resources that you might find useful to teach these skills as one way to help prevent bullying and aggression.
- **Teach children to become kind and sociable individuals.** During the early years, young children are great at modelling behaviours they see others using. Teacher's modelling of appropriate social skills such as sharing, speaking kindly to others, using manners, listening and cooperating are opportunities to teach young children the behaviours you want them to use.

Activity: Write a list of common behaviours you use in your daily interactions with children. What might these be modelling to children?

Write down a list of opportunities in your day to day practice that you can use to model appropriate social skills for children in your centre (such as kai, free play).

While modelling is powerful, young children also need to be explicitly taught social skills. [He Māpuna te Tamaiti: Supporting Social and Emotional Competence in Early Learning](#) is a resource recently developed for early childhood kaiako that provides descriptions and practical strategies on four key areas: creating a supportive environment; promoting emotional competence; promoting social competence; and supporting learning and engagement. He Māpuna te Tamaiti is embedded within the principles of Te Whāriki and is a great resource for kaiako to self-assess their current practices and areas where additional strategies can be included. Other resources on social and emotional competence in early childhood can be accessed [here](#).

- **Catch them being good.** Prevention is better than intervention. Look for opportunities to catch children being good and praise them for using cooperative and kind social skills and behaviours. Research demonstrates the powerful association between teacher praise and children's positive behaviours. The more teachers use behaviour specific praise to acknowledge children's positive behaviours, the fewer challenging behaviours they are likely to engage in³. Similarly, the more positive prosocial cooperative play children engage in, the fewer reasons they will have to engage in aggression or bullying behaviours. Young children often look to impress adults, so when teachers pay more attention to children's positive behaviours through praise and reinforcement, children are more likely to use these behaviours.

- **Really listen and understand their feelings.** Look for teachable moments to teach children empathy. Young children who can empathise with others are less likely to use aggression and bullying behaviours because they know that these behaviours might hurt their peer. For young children to develop empathy, they need to [understand feelings and emotions](#). Teaching about and labelling feelings and emotions is an excellent strategy that can be embedded in your day to day practices. You might like to use storybooks such as:

- *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr
- *The Pout-Pout Fish* by Deborah Diesen
- *My Many Coloured Days* by Dr Seuss

Asking children questions like 'how do you think (child) feels when you won't be their friend?', 'how would you feel if you weren't allowed to play with (child)?', or 'how do you know when someone else is feeling left out?' can help give children the language they need to describe the feelings of a bully, victim or bystander. Teaching young children [strategies to self-regulate](#) can also prevent aggression and bullying behaviours from escalating. Some examples of simple strategies to teach children include:

- Walking away and telling an adult
- Saying 'STOP! I don't like it' and, if the behaviour continues, finding an adult who can help
- Closing your eyes and taking deep breaths ([rocket breathing](#))

When teachers, parents/whānau and children practise acts of kindness, it makes the giver and receiver feel good about themselves. Encouraging children to look for opportunities to display kindness can promote their prosocial skills and awareness of others.

Activity: Reflect on the types of games and activities that you encourage children to participate in at your centre. Do these activities encourage cooperation or competition?

Find ways for all children to experience success that doesn't involve dominating their peers. For example, you might choose activities that require cooperation such as dancing over competitive games such as musical chairs.

Use a variety of resources to **model appropriate social skills and behaviours to children**. You can get creative and use puppets, storybooks and role-play to teach children about how to be kind and sociable individuals. Whatever strategy you choose, **make it a fun, mana-enhancing experience** for teacher and children.

Intervening in aggression and bullying

Recent research shows that teachers and parents respond to physical aggression differently compared to relational aggression⁴. When teachers and parents see young children excluding others (in other words, relational aggression), they're more likely to do nothing or take a lot longer to intervene than they would if they saw a child hit a peer.

Activity: Would you intervene to the same extent in relational and physical aggression?

If not, why not? If your response to different forms of aggression varies, what do you think this might communicate to young children?

When we differ in our intervention responses to young children's aggression and bullying, we might be communicating that some behaviours are more worthy of attention and intervention than others. For instance, when adults intervene in physical aggression immediately, they are saying to children that these behaviours are unacceptable and are worthy of immediate attention. On the other hand, when adults don't intervene in aggression or bullying, young children might think that these behaviours aren't serious and that they can get away with these behaviours. If teachers and parents don't work towards intervening and stopping bullying, it can grow and escalate. Below are some tips on how to effectively intervene in aggression and bullying.

Clear and consistent expectations. Effective intervention also requires consistency and follow-through. A great first step is to consider the centre philosophy, rules, and expectations. Involving children and their parents/whānau in these discussions will help promote a collaborative, supportive environment that is focused on providing a safe environment for children, free of bullying. Coming up with a list of strength-based, mana-enhancing responses to children's aggressive and bullying behaviours will help with consistency and follow-through. These could be displayed in a central location within the classroom.

The teacher's behaviour. Remember that a teacher's intervention response is powerful in modelling expectations, so intervening in aggression and bullying using a calm and firm approach reminds young children that the teacher is in control and will keep them safe. When responding to aggression or bullying, it is important to describe the behaviour that was not acceptable. This communicates to children the specific behaviour you observed and why it is not acceptable. The timing of teacher intervention is also critical to ensure the bullying behaviour doesn't escalate. The best time to intervene is when the child has calmed down and can process the impact of their behaviour.

Remember, intervention communicates to children that bullying behaviours are not acceptable and will not be allowed. This in turn helps children feel safe because they know the teacher is in control of the situation. Children who are targets of bullying, feel cared for and supported when they can rely on their teacher to protect them and intervene to stop the bullying behaviour. Teachers' intervention approaches can be used as a teachable moment to teach children strategies that lead to greater kindness and cooperation. **Intervention is important because it creates an atmosphere that communicates to children that bullying behaviours are unacceptable.**

Further reading

Swit, C. (2018). Early childhood educators' and parents' perceptions of bullying in preschool. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 47(3), 19-27. <https://www.psychology.org.nz/journal-archive/Early-Childhood-educators%E2%80%99-and-Parents%E2%80%99.pdf>

Endnotes

1 Kirves, L., & Sajaniemi, N. (2012). Bullying in early educational settings. *Early Child Development and Care*, 182(3-4), 383-400. DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2011.646724; Tanrikulu, I. (2020). Teacher reports on early childhood bullying: How often, who, what, when and where. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(4), 489-501, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2018.1479404; Ostrov, J.M., Kamper-DeMarco, K.E., Blakely-McClure, S.J. et al. (2019). Prospective associations between aggression/bullying and adjustment in preschool: Is general aggression different from bullying behavior? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 2572–2585. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1055-y>

2 Dan Olweus (leading bullying expert).

3 Fullerton, E. K., Conroy, M. A., & Correa, V. I. (2009). Early childhood teachers' use of specific praise statements with young children at risk for behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 34*(3), 118-135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019874290903400302>

4 Swit, C.S., McMaugh, A.L., & Warburton, W.A. (2018). Teacher and parent perceptions of relational and physical aggression during early childhood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*, 118–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0861-y>

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Cara Swit

Dr Cara Swit is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Canterbury and currently teaches in early intervention, child and family psychology, and positive behaviour. Her research explores the important role of teachers and parents/whānau in fostering healthy social relationships in young children. Cara's current research project examines the impact of young children's aggression on teacher and parent health and wellbeing. She delivers practical workshops designed to equip ECE educators and parents to support young children's social development.