



# Dealing with “Aggressive” or “Unsafe” Behaviors – Part 1

The following are only **suggestions** and will not necessarily apply to all children. Determining **if** or **how** to apply these strategies should be based on the child’s age, communication skills, cognitive and self-regulation abilities. Work closely with your ASD Clinician or other professionals to determine which would be appropriate.

## An Important Reminder

The most “severe”, challenging or difficult behaviors seen in children with autism (e.g. aggression, head-banging, violent tantrums) usually occur in situations when children are extremely overwhelmed, distressed, anxious and/or frustrated and have not developed effective communication and self-regulation strategies.

## For “Aggressive” Behaviors Directed Towards Others - General Guidelines & Strategies

Some children can direct behavior(s) considered “aggressive” (e.g. hitting, biting, pushing, etc.) toward people under specific circumstances. Parents need to work closely with their Kaiser ASD case manager to address these behaviors. Here are a few suggestions:

- Work with case managers to **identify situations and triggers** that may be causing the behavior(s):
  - Typical causes can be confusion, high anxiety or frustration, and /or attempting to communicate
  - Children who have limited means of interacting may hit others as a way of starting play.
- Work with case managers to **develop “replacement behaviors”**:
  - Identify positive behaviors that can *replace* aggressive behaviors (i.e. “replacement behaviors”). Examples may include:
    - Communicating for a “break” when frustrated or stressed
    - Saying or shaking head “no” to refuse an undesired activity or interaction
    - Chewing or biting a rubber tube to self-soothe when anxious or overwhelmed
  - Show child how to use these replacement behaviors, and guide child to use replacement behaviors in situations when unwanted behavior tends to occur. .
  - It is critical to teach replacement behaviors when child is *somewhat calm* (**before** aggressive behavior tends to occur!)
- If aggressive behavior is to communicate or seek attention:
  - Recognize and respond quickly to any *positive* or *appropriate* communication attempts
  - Respond as slowly and calmly as possible to aggressive or less desirable behaviors. Avoid big reactions (e.g. yelling or “animated” facial expressions) – this can often reinforce unwanted behavior(s)
  - Try not to reward aggressive or less desirable by turning it into a playful interaction

- For children that can understand and use language to communicate:
  - Establish a clear rule that aggressive behavior is not allowed. Make the rule concrete by writing it out and listing all aggressive behaviors that are forbidden. This should be done in a relaxed manner as in making “house rules” rather than as punishment – “it is just the rule.”
  - A reward system could be implemented where the child is rewarded each time he uses an appropriate behavior (even if doing so after being guided)
  - A social story (with pictures when appropriate) could also be written for these occasions. Social stories can show child that they get what they want more quickly when they communicate more clearly (i.e. using replacement behaviors). Pictures of replacement behaviors could be displayed in places where the child has the most outbursts (i.e. visual reminders).

### Self-Directed Aggressive Behaviors such as Head Banging or Self-Biting - General Guidelines & Strategies

- Focus on identifying situations or triggers (i.e. high anxiety, frustration, communication, etc.) so such behaviors can be *minimized* or *prevented*. Remember that for children with autism, **any social interaction can be stressful**. Trying to interact with a highly stressed, frustrated, or anxious child can further escalate their behavior.
- Using means to protect child from injury (i.e., holding a pillow between head and the wall/floor)
- If it is safe to do so, avoid giving the child a lot of attention during the episode. This can be very difficult for parents to do! When well-intentioned parents plead with or demand that their child stop, they are giving their child attention, which may increase or reinforce the behavior
  - Remember - when parents begin to ignore self-directed aggressive behaviors, the child may initially **increase** the behavior. If the child previously received a lot of attention for the behavior, the child will expect to get attention again.
- Encourage the use of replacement behaviors such as biting safe objects and using words or sounds to more appropriately express his frustration.
- Provide immediate and positive responses when child uses more desirable means of expressing frustration.
- Try to remain calm – anxiety and frustration often interferes with clear thinking and responding.
- Physically restraining the child should only be used to protect him/her - never as punishment!
- **\*\*Remember:** If self-injurious behavior continues to persist/ increases or the child is clear causing injury to himself, the use of other strategies (e.g. protective gear) should be discussed with the child’s case manager, pediatrician or developmental pediatrician.
- ❖ **To better understand and address your child’s behaviors, see the handouts**
  - **“Dealing with Aggressive or Unsafe Behaviors” – Part 2**
  - **“Understanding your child’s behavior” - Parts 1 & 2**

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