


# **Turning It Around**

## **What To Say To A Child Who Hurts Others**

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**Parents, teachers and principals, you are on the front line of fire daily dealing with children's aggressive behavior. Your job is a tough one and you deserve all the help that you can get. Here are some ideas of helping children process their behavior that has hurt others. These ideas are based on the growing evidence that children with chronic antisocial behavior are slow to learn through punishment and aversive conditioning. How you correct a child after he misbehaves will affect whether he will increase or decrease the undesired behavior in the future!**

**Have you ever felt frustrated because a child repeated his inappropriate behavior shortly after you scolded him? The research shows what we all know. The old way of treating aggressive children with reprimands and punishment does not work.**

### **Why Punishment Does Not Work**

**The research literature gives clear guidelines about the ineffectiveness of punishment as the only correction procedure for children's misbehavior. Yelling, shaming, scolding, and corporal punishment backfire and create a mind set in the child where he misbehaves more. Some children do worse when words like "never," "don't," "should not," and "It's not okay" are used during correction. There are many negative side effects associated with being punished:**

- Punishment for aggression may stop the behavior temporarily, but may further stimulate aggressive behavior.**
- The child may stop the punished behavior but may increase another aggressive behavior.**
- Punishment may serve as a model for aggression. Children imitate what they see adults do.**
- The punished behavior may stop only in the presence of the adult and increase in other settings.**
- The child may strike back at the punishing adult or displace his anger at someone else.**
- Frequent punishment may cause some children to withdraw and regress.**

- **Angry children who do not fear authority may become more angry and focus on revenge.**
- **The child may feel shame and harbor thoughts of lowered self- esteem (I'm a bad person. I'm mean.)**
- **Punishment merely suppresses the response but does not teach the child what to do.**

**In the short term, punishment may be effective in suppressing negative behavior when the punisher is present, but it does not teach the child positive ways to act. Punishing techniques that make the child feel bad about himself may make him act out more!**

### **What Does Work**

**The research shows that praise for appropriate behavior, reasoning, giving consequences, withholding privileges, time out and teaching the appropriate social skills do help a frustrated child make better behavioral choices.**

**The child who misbehaves constantly needs to hear correction statements phrased in positive language to implant alternative ways of thinking and acting in his developing value system. Telling the child with behavior problems what not to do often guarantees that he will go and do it! Instead tell him what to do and help him to feel good just thinking about acting in positive ways. Give a choice between two alternatives.**

**Teaching social skills gives a process of correcting the inappropriate behavior instead of suppressing it through punishment. Social skills training offers a more humane way of giving children tools to deal with conflict so that they can take care of themselves. Learning social skills helps children reduce aggressive and violent behavior. Teaching the prosocial skills helps all of us. When children learn and use positive reciprocal ways of interacting with each other, this adds to peace in our world.**

### **Processing Cues To Say After Conflict**

**What you say to an aggressive child will determine the likelihood of his decreasing the inappropriate behavior the next time. To break into the child's negative thinking patterns, process what happened and what could be different next time in a non- threatening way. The research shows that people are most ripe for change after a situation of high emotional arousal. Being corrected is generally a high arousal situation so the child should be ripe for new learning.**

**You have a golden opportunity to help your child make the commitment to change by using this teaching approach.**

**If you can get to the child's vulnerability and sense of fair play after a situation of conflict, you can help him make changes. Show the child the consequences of his actions on others. Whenever possible, give him a choice. Ask him to make a value judgment on what he did. Give him solid information on how he could react in positive ways. Always leave him feeling good about himself with hope for the future.**

**"It's Not My Fault!"--  
The Dynamics of Denial and Fear of Vulnerability**

**Children who get in trouble continuously receive so much punishment that they become hardened to it. They shrug it off with an "I don't care" attitude or laugh off your attempts at correction. This pose of indifference and toughness is a defense mechanism against feeling guilt and feeds into the rationalization of not being at fault. With this type of defense against feeling bad, blame is externalized to someone else: "I don't dare allow myself to feel bad inside, so I'll send those bad feelings towards someone else." This pattern is generally learned from parents and the cycle of aggression is often repeated down through generations of families.**

**Externalization of blame and rationalization of misbehavior is a tricky defense to break into. Get the child to feel his vulnerability and show him that you are on his side. Challenge him to learn different ways to think and act. Showing aggressive children a better way to deal with conflict and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own feelings and behavior is a loving and humane response to their cycle of aggression, rejection by others and the resulting poor self-esteem.**

**Children deserve to be nurtured even when they have not been nurturing to others. Watch that you do not identify with the child who has been the object of the aggression. Adults who have been victimized as a child may easily slip into anger over seeing another child being hurt. Go past your anger at your sense of injustice to the child who has been hurt. Your anger at the aggressor will guarantee that he will continue this behavior. Your nurturing and positive teaching will make a difference in the child who has hurt someone else. A key point of turning around his behavior is talking with the child about alternative ways that he could have handled conflict.**

**Expect denial from the child if you ask him to own up to his behavior when he is upset and angry. Children, like the rest of us, are not rational creatures when angry. Anger throws reason out the window. The research shows that cognitive distortions such as minimizing, justifying or rationalizing their destructive behavior has been associated with individuals with antisocial behavior. Their pain is so great and their defenses so practiced that they cannot see their own part in the conflict.**

**Do not set up a situation of threat where the child will feel the need to go into his defenses. Give him a cool down period before talking to him. Give him a choice of the place where he wants to cool down. Giving the child choices helps him to feel respect and helps him to be part of figuring out solutions. Imperatives given in a loud voice will cause him to shut down and be unavailable to your correction.**

**Angry children feel shame about being weak inside and turn around and victimize others. Your modeling firmness and fairness to the child will increase the likelihood that he will choose better ways of acting in the future. Scolding and shaming the child will only cause him to dislike himself even more resulting in a cycle of aggressive behavior. Helping the child save face and reduce the shame that he feels at being caught is part of getting him to understand and change his behavior.**

**Negative labels (bully, impossible, bad, mean, etc.) make the child feel shameful and cause him to put up his defenses to shut out what you say. He will feel bad enough just being found out. The child who is labeled often internalizes what is being said about him in a negative way. Talk about poor choices of behavior that can be changed with understanding and practice. Talk about the child's actions that are hurtful to others. The child can take responsibility for behavior; he cannot change a label which more than likely will turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.**

**Recognize the child's ability to change his own behavior. Discuss the things that he does that causes other people to refuse to be his friend (when true) or the things that he does that are not respectful to others. Tell the child that he may feel bad, but that he is not a bad kid. He just hasn't learned the rules to take care of himself in healthy ways. This takes the focus away from internal character attributes that can't be changed and puts the emphasis on learning. Emphasize that he just has some learning to do to take care of himself. Tell him that you are here to help him learn the skills of getting along with others.**

**Have the child review rules for getting along with each other and treating people with respect. Ask him to make a value judgment on a specific behavior, asking him "Was that a good thing to do?" If he responds with a rationalization regarding what the other person did to him, tell him that he is always responsible for his actions no matter what was done to him. Remind the child that choosing to use his words and talk about what upsets him is always the best choice. This type of processing after misbehavior helps the child make better decisions for next time.**

### **Error Correction:**

#### **"I Can Feel Good About Making the Wrong Right"**

**Stress that there need be no blame if each person takes responsibility for his own actions and takes steps to correct the situation so it does not happen again. Error correction teaches self responsibility. Review the rationale about mistakes being okay if you learn from them. This is the concept of error correction--if you make an error, correct it. That is why pencils have erasers. That is why we have word processing programs for computers with delete buttons. That is why we have U turns. The neat thing about making a mistake is the learning that you can gain from it. Mistakes are for learning. If we are smart, we don t have to keep making the same mistakes over and over like the one trick pony.**

**The skill of correcting your own mistake will be more evident if you make several dumb mistakes (like calling the principal by the wrong name or giving the wrong day of the week). Recognize your errors with the cheery message that mistakes are allowed in your class as long as people learn from them. This gives a positive model to the children about learning through errors. Errors are for learning!**

**Help the child to see that blaming someone else is an unnecessary defense. Tell him, "You don t have to defend yourself by blaming someone else. That doesn't help solve the problem. We are problem solvers here. I m here to help you. You need to learn how to take care of yourself next time. That is the most wonderful thing you can do for yourself! Now tell me your part in this so we can work it out so it won't have to happen again." This approach takes the child out of the defensive mode and into error correction.**

**Ask the child to describe the poor choice of behavior that he made. Ask him how he will act differently next time. Ask him what he will say to help himself. Ask the child what he can do to correct his error to make amends for his behavior. Give choices for the penalty of the infraction of the rules and send the child off to make his amends.**

## **Shame Removal and the Silly Game of "Pull Outs"**

**The child who is called on the carpet most likely will feel ashamed although this may be covered up by actions of bravado. It may help you to think of macho behavior as the mask for underlying fear and shame. Shame reactions are shown in postural and facial ways such as hanging the head and refusing to look you in the eye, playing dumb, avoiding talking about the event or talking in short phrases. Shame locks in bad behavior! Unreleased shame results in decreasing self esteem thus setting the internal climate for more aggression with others. Unless you help the child take responsibility for his inappropriate behavior and release the shame that he feels, he will continue to feel bad inside and the misbehavior most likely will continue.**

**Use the techniques of "Pull Outs" as a way to humorously release shame after the child has taken responsibility about his behavior. Tell the child that if he has made the decision to do it differently next time, he doesn't need to hold on to bad feelings. If he has made amends and corrected his error for the future, then the bad feelings can go away.**

**Ask the child where the bad feelings are in his body. They usually are in the chest, stomach or brain areas. Ask him to let the feelings come up and feel their worst. "Okay, let's make them really strong. Let those feeling come up and feel BAD. Have you got them up now so you can move them? Tell yourself, 'I don't have to do that behavior anymore so I can let go of the bad feelings.' Get ready to pull them out. Here we go. I'll help you. Let's pull them out!" Using pulling motions with your hands pretend to pull from the area that the child described. Flick your fingers to indicate getting rid of the negative energy. Encourage him to throw the bad feelings in the wastebasket or dumpster and remind him that he can let go of bad feelings if he can take responsibility for changing his behavior. Add more reassurance about believing in his ability to make good choices in the future.**

**Disclaimer: Do not use this technique on children who act in ways that they appear to have no conscience. Other steps are needed for the child who has no remorse about hurting others. This type of child needs to develop empathy for those caught in the victim role. Professional help will be needed to teach the unremorseful child to feel the effects of his negative action on others and to make value judgments about his behavior.**

## **When Talking To Two Children At The Same Time**

**Ask each child what his part was in the conflict. Stress responsibility for problem solving and using words to handle the threat. Go over the rules about treating people with respect and ask each child to describe how he forgot a rule of being fair and friendly. Say to each child "Can you own your part of this problem? What did you do? You can feel good about owning your own part in this fight. Tell me about your behavior." Show enthusiastic appreciation for the child who can stick to describing what he did wrong without going into blaming the other person. Stress the importance of being part of the solution, not part of the problem.**

**After each child has had a turn talking, ask the children to see the conflict from the other persons eyes. Role play the situation switching roles. Humor added here will break into the tension around the situation.**

### **Teaching Responsibility for One's Own Actions**

**Ask the children "What could you have done differently? What is our rule about that? What will you do next time that someone \_\_\_\_ ? What can you do when you feel threatened?"**

**PRAISE, PRAISE, PRAISE any remarks that show a child is catching on to the idea of learning about himself instead of blaming the other child. Ask them for a self talk statement they will use next time to handle their own feelings of threat that come up. Practice saying the self talk statements several times.**

**Children who have conflict, sometimes want to be friends, but they need your help in figuring out how they can handle the conflict. Tell the children that you would like them to be friends but whether they can or not is really up to them. Send the two children off to agree on a solution, should the same incident happen again, and report back to you what they have worked out.**

**PRAISE AND RECOGNITION FOR CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING  
WILL INCREASE THIS BEHAVIOR!**

**Remember, your energy should go to helping children feel good about solving their own problems. Putting your energy in scolding children can become a stimulus for their continued misbehavior!**