**Taming aggression in children:**

**Source-** [www.parentingscrience.com](http://www.parentingscrience.com)

Aggression in children can take many forms: Angry tantrums; hitting, kicking, or biting; hot-headed outbursts that destroy property; cool-headed bullying; verbal attacks; attempts to control others through threats or violence.

**What sets children off?**

In some cases, kids lash out because they’re frustrated by a problem that’s too big for them. They haven’t yet learned how to control their impulses, or work out conflicts in socially acceptable ways.

In other cases, kids may be wrestling with special difficulties — like stressful life events, emotional regulation problems, attention deficits, autistic symptoms, or hyperactivity.

Yet in all cases — even where children have been diagnosed with serious conduct disorders — adults can have a powerful influence.

Humans aren’t born with programming that compels them to respond to the world with hostility. We all have the capacity to behave aggressively. Whether or not we do it depends on how we perceive the world.

Aggressive tendencies are shaped by environmental conditions — the pressures, threats, opportunities, and consequences that children experience. By tweaking these conditions, we can improve behavior and change the course of development.

That doesn’t mean it’s your fault if your child is acting out. Genetic factors put some kids at higher risk for trouble. And aggression in children is influenced by environmental forces outside the home. Peers, teachers, neighborhoods, media messages, ideologies, and cultural factors all play a role.

But whatever factors put a child at risk, there is nothing inevitable about the outcome. When caregivers get the help they need, they can have an important impact.

Randomized, controlled studies show that aggressive kids change trajectory when parents get practical training and moral support.

The interventions work, in part, because parents learn specific tactics for handling aggression. But they also work because parents learn to change their outlook.

Struggling with a child’s behavior problems is stressful and demoralizing. It saps your resilience, your sense of optimism, competence, and goodwill. It can redefine the parent-child relationship in a destructive way, and prompt you to think about your child in ways that undermine your ability to cope.

And counterproductive thoughts fuel the conflict, and make behavior problems worse.

Replace these toxic mental habits with positive, constructive, problem-solving thoughts, and you can stop bad behavior before it erupts.

**Tips for maintaining a confident, constructive outlook**

**1. Don’t take it personally**-

When your child fails to comply with a request, it’s easy to feel disrespected. It’s easy to feel targeted when your child flies into a rage. But these emotional reactions, however natural, are wrong-headed.

First, kids don’t process emotions and information the way adults do (see below). If your child is very young, there’s a lot she doesn’t understand about her own feelings, let alone yours. If your child is older, it’s still likely that your child’s misbehavior reflects impulsivity or incompetence– not malice.

Second, research suggests that our pessimistic social beliefs — the tendency to attribute hostile intentions where none exist — can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. People who assume the worst tend to provoke negative behavior from others. And parents who make hostile attributions can end up creating the very problems they want to solve.

In one study, mothers who made hostile attributions about their toddlers were more likely, three and half years later, to have children with aggressive behavior problems. This link between maternal beliefs and aggression in children remained significant even after the researchers controlled for pre-existing child difficulties, as well as the negative parenting behavior that tends to go accompany hostile attributions.

Reminding yourself not to take it personally isn’t just good for your mood. It’s good for your relationship, and good for your child’s long-term development.

**2. Get realistic expectations about your child’s ability to follow rules and comply with requests-**

Young children have shorter attention spans, and they are easily distracted. They take more time to process verbal instructions. As I explain elsewhere, their opens in a new window working memory capacities — the sheer number of things they can keep in mind at any given moment — are more limited.

Learning new information, and adapting to a change of rules or procedure, may take longer than you realize. Young children require more practice than older kids do, and older kids need more practice than adults.

So when we issue directions, we shouldn’t expect young children to respond quickly and efficiently. They work at a slower speed, and it’s harder for them to transition from one activity to the next. They need us to provide them with clear, simple directions, and then give them the extra time they need to switch gears.

Older children can handle more complexity and speed, but their attention spans, working memory capacities, impulse control, and task-switching skills are still developing.

By tuning into your child’s pace and abilities — and providing patient, calm reminders — you reshape the task into one he’s got the equipment to solve. And your child will get to experience the social and emotional rewards for cooperating — a crucial experience for his long-term development. You invest more time, but it’s an investment that will pay off.

**3. Get realistic expectations about the development of empathy and kindness-**

Throughout childhood, kids are still learning about emotions — how to regulate their own moods and read the minds of others. Dependent, inexperienced, and vulnerable, young children are more easily threatened and thus more likely focus on protecting their own interests (Li et al 2013).

Older kids, too, may respond this way if they perceive the world to be hostile or unjust. And some kids are at a physiological disadvantage. They have the ability to learn about social signals, but their brains don’t reward them as much for doing so. As a consequence, kids are less likely to learn on their own. They need our help.

So while children might behave in ways that seem selfish, that doesn’t mean they are incorrigibly self-absorbed. As I explain in other Parenting Science articles, children demonstrate a new window of capacity for empathy and kindness from a very early age. In fact, even when a new window opens babies seem to root for the underdog.

When children fail to show concern for others, it’s often because they perceive the situation differently, or don’t know how to control their impulses. They need opportunities to learn — by developing secure relationships with us; talking about their feelings and the emotional signals of others; and observing positive role models, and growing up in an environment that rewards opens in a new window of self-control and cooperation.

**4. Focus on maintaining a positive relationship-**

If your child keeps misbehaving, you might feel it’s important to answer every offense with criticism, threats, or punishment. But is this actually a good idea? What you end up with is a parent-child relationship that’s mostly characterized by negative exchanges.

It’s a grim outcome, and it’s also counter-productive. Studies suggest that kids are more likely to learn desirable social skills when we provide them with positive feedback for making good choices — not threats and punishments for doing the wrong thing.

Moreover, a diet of negativity can make kids become more defiant. Negative parenting can lead to a downward spiral of misbehavior, punishment, retaliation, more punishment, and more misbehavior. Physical punishment is especially ill-advised. When parents impose physical punishments, children’s aggressive behavior problems tend to get worse.

How do you stay calm and upbeat? It isn’t easy, not if your child seems stuck in “defiance mode.” You’ll need social support, and maybe some professional guidance. Studies show that therapists specifically trained in handling aggression in children can help reduce stress and improve behavior.

One approach, used internationally, is the so-called “Oregon Model” of Parent Management Training. Through weekly sessions of coaching and role playing, parents learn effective ways to set limits, foster cooperation, settle arguments in a constructive way, and inject daily life with pleasant, loving activities.

But the first step is reorganizing your priorities. Maintaining positive relations is more important than prosecuting every failure. Sometimes you need to choose your battles. For more information, see my tips for opens in a new window handling aggression in children, as well as opens in a new window these positive parenting tips.

**5. Don’t sacrifice your own psychological well-being-**

Dealing with aggression is very stressful, and stress hurts. It makes us ill, clouds our thinking, and damages relationships. As I explain elsewhere, stress is contagious: Even young infants pick up on our negative moods. And when parents are stressed out, it adds fuel to the fire: Their children’s behavior problems tend to get worse. Read more about it in my article, “Parenting Stress: Why it matters, and what we can do to get relief.”

So addressing your own well-being shouldn’t be an after-thought, a luxury to be put off until your child’s behavior problems improve. It’s a pressing issue, a central player in the crisis.

For information about evidence-based, stress-busting tactics, see my opens in new window evidence-based tips for coping with parenting stress, and don’t hesitate to seek professional advice from a therapist trained to handle aggressive behavior in children.

Your therapist or physician may recommend that you participate in an evidence-based parenting support group, like Triple P (the “Positive Parenting Program”). As noted above, such programs have a positive track record.