



PARENT TOOLKIT

Emotionally Heightened Behaviour



Aggressive behaviour at home — shouting, hitting, throwing, refusal, or emotional outbursts — is usually a **stress response**, not a choice. Children often behave aggressively when they feel overwhelmed, frightened, misunderstood, or unable to communicate their needs.

This toolkit will help you understand triggers, prevent escalation, and respond calmly and effectively.

Why Aggression Happens

Aggression is often a **fight-or-flight response** triggered by:

- Anxiety or fear
- Feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated
- Sensory overload
- Difficulty with communication or understanding
- Low emotional regulation skills
- Past trauma or attachment stress
- Feeling out of control
- Changes in routine, transitions, or unexpected demands

Aggression = a **signal of distress**, not a sign of “bad behaviour”.

Spotting Early Warning Signs

Children rarely go from calm to explosive instantly. Look for:

- Restlessness / pacing
- Tight or tense body language
- Clenched fists
- Quick breathing
- Irritation or withdrawal
- Saying “stop”, “leave me”, “no” to small demands
- Facial flushing or tears
- Increase in sensory-seeking or avoidance behaviours

Spotting these signs early helps you intervene before escalation.

Preventing Escalation: Everyday Strategies

Reduce demands when they are overwhelmed

Use simple, short instructions or offer alternatives.

Build predictable routines

Children feel calmer when they know what’s happening next.

Use visual schedules

Pictures instead of words reduce confusion and stress.

Give transition warnings

“Five minutes left before we tidy.”

Use timers, countdowns, or gentle alerts

Limit sensory overload

Lower lights, reduce noise, or offer sensory tools.

Strengthen connection

Daily positive time together reduces emotional volatility.

Keep expectations clear and consistent

Children feel safer when rules are predictable

De-escalation Strategies During Heightened Emotions

When your child is in a heightened emotional state, focus on **safety and calm**, not consequences.

What to do:

- Stay calm and speak in a soft, even tone
- Keep your body language neutral
- Give space if they need it
- Offer simple, regulating choices (“Quiet time or a drink of water?”)
- Use minimal words
- Validate feelings:
“You’re really upset. I’m here to help when you’re ready.”
- Remove siblings or move fragile objects if needed

What NOT to do:

- Don’t argue
- Don’t threaten consequences

- Don't raise your voice
- Don't force eye contact
- Don't try to reason in the middle of a meltdown

Reasoning only works **after** regulation.

After the Outburst: Repair & Reconnection

When the child is calm:

Keep the conversation brief and gentle

Avoid blame

Explore the trigger

“What happened that made things feel too much?”

Problem-solve together

“What could help next time?”

Offer suggestions if needed.

Praise effort

“You calmed your body so well. That was really hard.”

Rebuild connection

Cuddles, play, or a quiet shared activity.

Emotional Regulation Strategies to Teach

Teach skills *between* incidents, not during them.

- Deep breathing games
- Blowing bubbles or feathers
- Heavy work (pushing, carrying, wall push-ups)
- Safe sensory tools (squeezy balls, weighted items under guidance)
- Drawing or journaling
- “Emotion thermometer” or Zones of Regulation
- Quiet safe space (tent, beanbag, blanket)
- Movement breaks throughout the day

Practice regularly so the child can use them when needed.

Home Environment Strategies

- Keep mornings and evenings calm and predictable
- Build routine charts (morning, after school, bedtime)
- Use checklists to reduce demands on memory
- Reduce clutter when sensory issues are present
- Build in movement or sensory breaks regularly
- Create a “calm zone” your child chooses
- Limit screen-time only during calm periods, not as a punishment

How Parents Can Stay Regulated

Your calm state helps your child regulate.

- Take slow breaths before responding
- Step away briefly if you need space
- Use supportive statements to yourself:

“This behaviour is communication. I can stay calm.”

- Reach out to supportive adults when needed
- Avoid guilt — dysregulation is not caused by poor parenting

Small adjustments in your tone and pace can make big differences.

Supporting Yourself as a Parent

Aggressive behaviour at home is exhausting. You deserve support too.

- Seek connection and share strategies with other parents
- Prioritise your rest and wellbeing
- Celebrate small improvements
- Recognise triggers in yourself
- Set realistic expectations — progress is gradual
- Remember: your child is not giving you a hard time, they are **having** a hard time

You are doing an incredibly hard job with love and patience.

Aggressive or heightened behaviour is a **communication of overwhelm** — not a reflection of your child’s character or your parenting. With consistent routines, calm responses, emotional regulation strategies, and a supportive environment, children can learn healthier ways to express themselves.

Your steady presence is the anchor that helps them feel safe.

