

Solutions Newsletter

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Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Understanding Children's Aggression and Irritability

Well before being faced with the challenges of widespread school closures because of the pandemic, educators in the United States had noted a rise in disruptive, aggressive, and even violent student behavior that compromises both learning and safety. Teachers everywhere have reported physical and verbal outbursts directed at them and at other students. In some schools, these eruptions have become alarmingly common, upsetting classmates and teachers alike, and at their worst, making classroom learning impossible.

Now, after almost two full years of coping with pandemic-related fear, disruption, and uncertainty, both teachers and parents are struggling to manage an explosion of mental health symptoms, including aggressive behaviors. Anger outbursts are not confined to older students: some of the biggest increases in aggressive behaviors have been seen among elementary school children. Many parents are themselves exhausted and depleted as they try to help their stressed children cope with disrupted school, home, and social routines, while at the same time trying to earn a living and take care of their own health and well-being.

Although there is no doubt that aggression and irritability amongst school-aged children have increased, the causes for this are less clear-cut. Some important considerations include:

- Behind aggression one often finds trauma. When a parent encounters defiant, angry, or aggressive behavior, the impulse might be to label the child as "oppositional" or simply "a problem kid." But children rarely want to be difficult, and aggression and acting out are often trauma survival mechanisms. The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a shared trauma, of course, but many youngsters today are impacted by a host of other traumas including extreme poverty, exposure to violence, food insecurity, bullying, neglect, the toxic effects of racism, etc.
- Students with neuro-cognitive differences such as ADHD or learning disabilities, or who are on the Autism Spectrum, might lash out when frustrated, when they face challenging school assignments, or when forced to deal with unexpected change. Students with sensory processing issues are easily overwhelmed by too much noise, too many people, and other uncomfortable sensory inputs, and this sensory overload can lead to aggressive behavior.

- Undiagnosed anxiety or depression can also trigger explosive outbursts. While we might expect anxious and/or depressed children to be withdrawn or reserved, these mental health conditions can show up in any number of ways, including emotional volatility.

Some tips for parents:

- When dealing with difficult or disruptive behavior, remember that "behavior is communication" and that children who are lashing out are almost always in distress.
- Learn about preventive approaches to avoid or de-escalate aggression. An approach (e.g., the Nurtured Heart Approach®) that emphasizes positive attention for desired behaviors rather than punishment for negative ones is preferable. Consequences for inappropriate behaviors or rule-breaking should be delivered consistently, and in a matter of fact, unemotional way.
- Learn about and support your district's social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula that teaches students self-regulation, problem solving, and interpersonal, conflict resolution skills.
- Adopt a Trauma-Informed perspective when speaking with your child. In a nutshell, this involves approaching him/her with a "What happened to you?" rather than a "What's wrong with you?" stance.
- Work with your child's teachers to understand what triggers your child. Examine the home environment to eliminate or reduce triggering stimuli, e.g., bright lights, excessive noise, no alone time, too little structure, etc.
- Make use of school-based and/or community mental health programs BEFORE a major aggressive incident occurs. In conjunction with a trained mental health specialist, consider whether medications for anxiety, depression, ADHD, etc. might benefit your child.
- As always, attend to your own health and well-being. Seek therapy if you are finding it difficult to manage your own emotions and/or those behaviors that might trigger your child.