

REDUCING AGGRESSIVE PLAY



By Maria Sargent

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Reduction of Aggressive Play takes many forms.
The following list will help guide you
to the correct technique for your situation.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching Behavioral and Social Skills



Teaching behavioral skills is very easy as long as the two main concepts of appropriate practice are followed. They are as follows:

1. Teach using visual or physical cues

We already know that children in this age group do much better if we use visual cues (items they can look at or handle) and include as many physical cues (active learning) as possible. Even though this type of teaching is second nature to us for general objectives, we often do not think to use these same techniques when dealing with behavior. Returning to this physically active and visually-cued learning will serve as the foundation for the techniques that will follow in this unit.

2. Teach systematically over time

Again, we know this approach so well and use it daily in our practice, but we may not think to apply this same concept to behavior. Since we are less familiar with the developmental sequences for daily behavioral demands like cleaning up, standing in line, managing group, etc, we do not use them in our behavior support and only focus on the “end-behavior” desired.

This unit will focus on the developmental sequences associated with aggressive play and related concepts. The content will include strategies for the general classroom as well as more serious situations that will need systematic intervention and/or a formal behavior support plan.

Confusion in Moral Code Categories



The last concept we will explore before moving on to techniques is confusion in moral codes and how they effect a child's perception of right and wrong behavior. This issue has several levels. We will discuss them in order of seriousness.

1. Realism of Media Our older cartoons, movies, and comics used to have a degree of non-realism to them. The visuals were simple and concepts so silly (i.e. dropping anvils on someone's head) that children could readily distinguish between what characters were doing in a pretend situation and what they could do in real life. This difference has changed greatly. *Even imaginary creatures, like dragons, are so lifelike that children are unsure of what is real and not real anymore.* This is not only impacting the way in which children view violence, but it is also causing more stress because children feel less secure and feel a need to "protect themselves".

2. Authority for "Aggression" Most older forms of media that dealt with "bad guys" had some type of authority figure character who *had to authorize the use of force* (i.e., Superman had to be summoned; batman waited for a call from the commissioner). These characters rarely acted on their own, and there was always a suggestion of a higher order/law that they had to follow. In most cases, this authority figure has vanished in the media. Characters now act on their own with no guidelines or authority to rein them in. If there is a "higher power", the rules that are being followed are never explained and often change with the scenario. There are no set parameters for behavior. To complicate matters more, if there is a human child in the scenario, their parents are often portrayed as dead, absent, or non-caring, suggesting the child has to create a value code on their own and from scratch.

3. Mixed Messages There was a time when a child could tell a “bad guy” and a “good guy” from each other easily. This is a necessary stage of development. Children who receive the message of “sometimes good people do bad things” can become frightened and unsure whether the “good people” in their lives (e.g., parents, friends, and themselves) could also turn bad. Not a good thing to do to children... This type of “grey” area concept should be left until adolescence.

So, children need clear-cut, good and evil characters at this age, but that is not necessarily happening. I cannot give direct examples or pictures due to the copyright nature of this document, but suffice it to say that there are characters that are now split into three groups: good, bad, and mixed characteristics....and the ones with the most power are the ones who can go back and forth between good and bad. In some movies, you even see supposedly “good guys” resorting to incorrect behavior to manage situations. This type of mixed message is obviously confusing at best. Throw in the fact that many children see their own parents and relatives engaged in aggression, and the moral confusion is easy to understand.



4. Purposeful Evil The last concept is also difficult to describe without naming examples, but with a little information, you should be able to research this a bit on your own to get the details. In short, *many video games have now crossed the line where the only way to win is to commit aggressive or criminal acts.* For example, you can get more points when you rape someone, beat them, etc. Many games have the players assume roles of devils with the goal to destroy heaven and angels, etc. There are many more examples where the goal is to target the elderly, children, women, religious characters, or law enforcement. Even though these games often have restricted audiences, they can and ARE getting into the hands of our younger children. I am sure that the concern here is obvious...

**GENERAL
TECHNIQUES
FOR THE
CLASSROOM**

Teaching Gentleness

So, the previous pages may be depressing enough to cause you to decide to leave teaching, but remember, even if you are now considering a career in fast food service, these children come into the restaurant. Better to stay in early childhood education where we can make a difference in these little minds ☺ In light of this, let's get started on our first technique, teaching gentleness. Two examples of this approach should be enough to get you started.

Remember, these examples are for *general classroom use*. If you need something more intense and direct for an individual child, please see Gentle Hands Therapy on page 14.

Simple Games

The easiest way to embed this in the classroom, even for older students, is to have many games that automatically teach the skill. These can be available for children to play during free time or indoor recess. They include any game that requires a gentle and/or controlled touch to win. Many of these are unfortunately vintage games that have to be located on an auction site or at a garage sale, but they are worth the search. Some games to consider include: Jenga®, Pick-Up-Sticks, Paper Football (paper folded into triangle), quarter basketball, Don't Break the Ice®, Operation®, etc. Any other game in this category is perfect!



Art Activities

Another easy way to provide this in-class is to use art activities such as working with paper mache', wet paper molds, sand art pictures, pencil rubbings, paper construction, or anything else that requires a gentle touch. Many times, my true "art periods" were taught by another teacher, so I just made sure to include one of these periodically in the units and other general activities in my own classroom.

Teaching Empathy

Teaching empathy is also easily embedded in a classroom routine and many schools already do this type of work by having children donate money, materials (i.e. cans of food, old coats, toys, etc.) to various organizations. While these activities are worthwhile, they do not teach empathy well because children of this age have difficulty processing time and space. The people they are assisting also rarely respond to the donation, and if they do respond, it is by writing and has little meaning to children. So, in addition to these school-driven activities, try to work at least one of these projects into your year.

Remember, these examples are for *general classroom use*. If you need something more direct for an individual child, please see Empathy Training on page 16 or Pain Recognition Intervention on page 18.

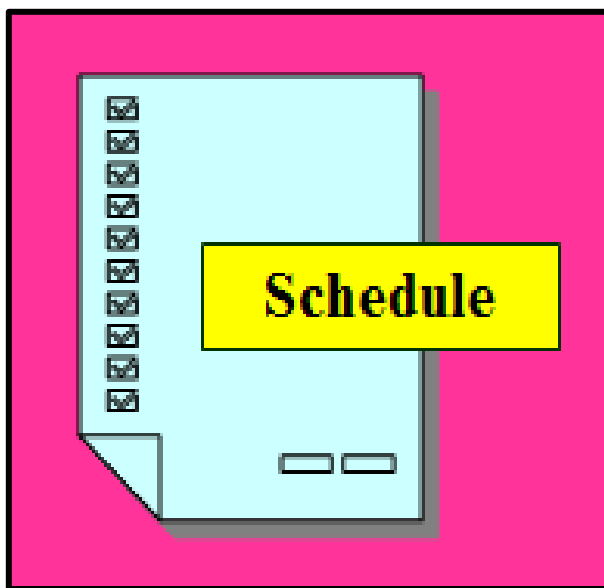
Community Assistance This type of project is run like any other school donation drive, but the person is in the community. Whether it is collecting clothes for a family who had a fire, collecting money to buy a new tire for an elderly neighbor, or some other local need, the key is *the person can come in and thank the children and explain how their efforts have changed their life for the better*. This is what produces empathy. The child must see and feel the result of the action from the person's point of view, and this is not possible in long-distance projects. Bring it all closer to home to improve this skill.

Class Surprise Day Once each year have a "surprise day" for each child. Just make sure the child is out of the room or absent when you inform the class that the person's turn is coming up. Try to make it personal and special to that child by including their interests. Having the children decorate a classmate's seat, wrap a special set of stickers or pencil, make a quick video, etc. This not only allows them to show kindness to a peer, but it also allows them to directly and immediately see the results of their efforts.

Aggressive Play Intervention—Schedule Version

Many children will use aggressive play regardless of rules in the classroom that forbid its use. There are just some toys, especially super heroes, that lend themselves to this type of play. Because of this problem, many schools have just chosen to ban these toys all together. This can keep the classroom and playground quieter, but it rarely actually deals with the problem, so the aggression resurfaces later with different objects. This is why you see children using items like blocks or carrot sticks as weapons. So, if you are permitted, it really is better to allow this play in some form and then work to remove it for good. It is the only way to provide the intervention that some of these children need.

Here is the first of the direct aggressive play conversion approaches. This is the one that is easiest to use in a general classroom. Other forms for serious situations can be found, beginning on page 22 .



Aggressive Play Intervention—Schedule Version In this form of the aggressive play intervention, the teacher *sets aside a special time in which children can use toys or themes that tend to be aggressive.* This allows the teacher to control when this play is occurring and free themselves up to be available to redirect the children’s play. Often just having the teacher “present” will reduce the problem and encourage the children to try different scenario. Note that you do not have to announce this time period or force this type of play; it is just the “permitted” time when these toys or play themes may be used.

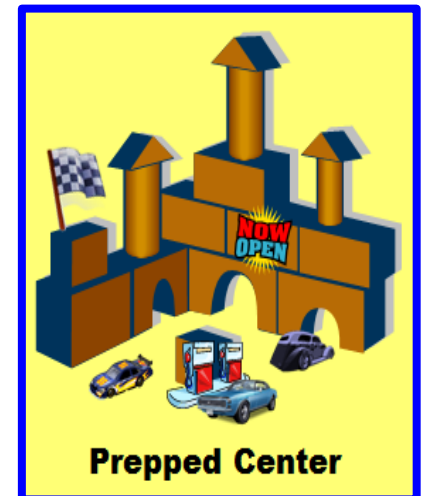
Fluidity of Materials Technique (simple)

As was mentioned earlier, our children are not as skilled in their play as children of a different era. This means that when a toy is very demanding they do not know how to play with it and often degenerate down to aggression. This is why children have more difficulty with toys like blocks, sand, water, and other toys that do not directly suggest a play scenario. More structured toys like puzzles, on the other hand, are rarely used in an aggressive manner since their use is very clear.

Setting Up Fluid Activities In some cases, a teacher should be present to assist children with an open-ended toy. For example, puppets are a very open-ended toy that children rarely know how to use well. This is why they perform the two actions they know (i.e. say hello, eat something) and then begin to fight with them. They simply do not know what else to do! By setting up a puppet show, children can be assisted to use this difficult toy. Teachers can model or directly teach the children other, less aggressive, things to do. A more intensive version of this technique can be found on page 19.



Prepping Centers In many cases the teacher would like the children to use fluid areas of the room (i.e. block center) that are open during the majority of the day. One way to assist children in this situation is to periodically pre-prepare the center to suggest new ways to use the toys. The degree to which you must prep and how long varies, but most children rarely need to see a new scenario more than once. This approach works for both younger children in play centers and older students working with open-ended items in art, science, or in cooperative groups on projects.



**INTERVENTIONS
FOR SERIOUS
PROBLEMS**

Gentle Hands Therapy

Younger students needing this intervention can use the play methods described on the next two pages. Older students may prefer techniques described on page 10, but may respond better if they are provided in a one-on-one or small group setting where direct assistance is available.

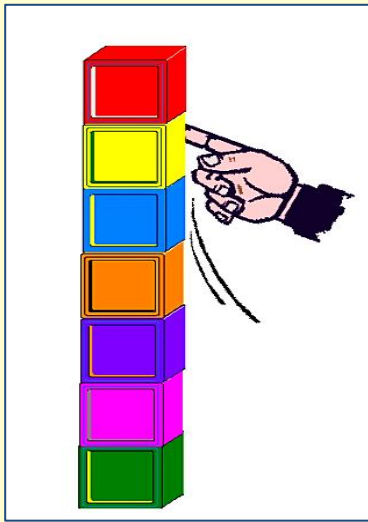
Teaching “Gentle Hands” using Shaving Cream

1. Have the child play with shaving cream in the same manner you would fingerpaint. You should be playing with your own materials next to the child.
2. Once the child is over the initial excitement of the activity (but before they are bored) begin to mound the shaving cream on one of your hands and then “smooth” it with the other. Bring the child’s attention to this so they can begin to imitate your actions.
3. Play different variations of this game with both your hands and their hands holding the shaving cream. Encourage the child to try to shave the mound down as far as possible without hitting the skin.
4. Make sure to use the words “gentle hands” as you are playing the game so the vocabulary can be used at a later time to guide behavior. If a visual cue is going to be used for this skill as part of a formal program, make sure to also introduce it at some point. A cue you can use can be found in the Appendix.



Teaching “Gentle Hands” using Towers of Blocks

1. Have the child build block towers with colorful blocks. Make the task as appealing as possible so the child remains interested. Placing small figures on top, embedding the towers in another more complex task like building a city, etc. can keep slightly older children engaged in this simple task.
2. Begin to talk about how “stable” the towers are and how architects have to check for this stability in order to keep people safe. Begin pretending to be the building inspector and check the towers by running your finger down the side of them. Make sure the towers are not so tall or unstable that the task is impossible for a child.



3. Encourage the child to also be the “building inspector” and imitate your actions. Guide them to the degree necessary to achieve success. If the child is struggling, make the towers shorter and/or wider to help. Show them how to make a “slow movement” if needed.
4. Once the child is successful with vertical movements that are gentle, vary the task to include running hands along horizontal blocks that serve as bridges. Eventually “check” complex buildings with corners, etc. for “safety”.

These ideas should get you started teaching this skill. Explore any other variation you can think of, including making different size “holes or houses” in playdough for a set of animals of differing sizes, trying to make large and then successively smaller paint dots with a paintbrush, or adjusting amounts of colored glue coming out of a glue bottle to fill circles of varying sizes (place white paper with drawn circles under plastic wrap and secure wrap tightly---when glue is dry, they will peel off ☺). I am sure you will come up with many more ideas!

Empathy Training

Some children need direct assistance to develop an understanding of their own emotions PRIOR to being able to understand the emotions and feelings of others. Here are some ideas to try to develop this understanding. This is not a quick process, especially if the child has a developmental learning issue that is complicating the situation. It is also important to remember that some children will have disabilities that will permanently hinder this skill (i.e. autism). These children will need to be rotely taught “emotional responses”. This skill is described on the next page under the heading *Rote Patterning Social Responses* and conceptually in the manual titled “*Gang-Proofing Students*”.



- *Have child look in mirror and make faces. Encourage the child to imitate other faces. (If imitation is not a skill, you will need to teach this before proceeding with this objective. Children cannot understand another’s action until they notice other people enough to imitate them.) Eventually begin to label the emotions, beginning with simple concepts like sad, angry, happy, scared, etc. Play games where you guess each other’s emotions and eventually include peers so the skill transfers to social interactions.
- *Continue to develop vocabulary by labeling the emotions the child is feeling. Eventually label the emotions of others, especially when the child is involved in the interaction.
- *Once the emotions and related vocabulary are understood, begin to play short games where animals or people of interest to the child (i.e. policeman, dinosaurs, favorite characters, etc.) are showing different emotions. Make it silly and use visual cues (i.e. your face and body and picture cards) to assist where needed. Picture cards for your use can be found in the Appendix.
- *Any other game that can be modified to include emotions (i.e. tag, fingerplays, stories, etc.) is useful...

Rote Patterning Social Responses

Rote patterning a skill means that the social interaction is directly taught as a sequence. This is often used as the basis of social stories and other well-known techniques for children with autism. **But, this can also be used for other children or whole classrooms.**

Sometimes teachers are afraid to rote pattern a skill like sharing or saying sorry. They feel that the emotion is not present so the physical action has no meaning. But, just think about how we teach an infant to wave goodbye. We take their hand; wave it until they eventually begin to repeat the physical action.



At this point, though, they have NO idea why they are doing this, they are just imitating blindly. But, when they perform this action in the world, they begin to get a social response, and over time, this develops meaning. They develop the emotion and understanding that goes with the physical action. **You have to interact at a physical level before you can get a response from the world that you can eventually link to social/emotional concepts.**

So, when working with children needing intense intervention for social skills, we often have to take them back down to this “infant” physical level and establish the body action before the emotion can be understood. This means that we may HAVE to teach the child to say they are “sorry” before we can ever get enough social response from peers for them to understand what the words mean. In a similar manner, we may have to teach them to mimic the physical actions of being kind, gentle, showing concern, etc. before they can develop the emotional understanding of empathy.

This important technique can also be used to teach whole classrooms to share, take turns, trade toys....really any social skill that is missing. Sometimes you just have to go back to the basics and take the time to teach what children are lacking. Do not be afraid to consider this for your total room if the year calls for it.

Pain Recognition Intervention

In extremely difficult situations, I have had to teach children “what pain is”. This is a difficult one to cue for obvious reasons. Here is one way I have done it on the rare occasions where I had a child who truly lacked empathy but was capable of understanding the emotion. In these cases, the child will probably need this technique in addition to the other empathy approaches already covered.

Teaching “Pain Recognition” using Gelatin Sheets

1. Pour gelatin in a plastic bag, and then place it on a cookie sheet so it solidifies flat. Use the type of gelatin mixture that holds its shape well (i.e. the kind used to make cut-outs or cubes).
2. Talk with the child about how you “can’t see” what happens under someone’s skin when you hit them. You can’t see through it. Then introduce the bagged gelatin (do not remove from tray so it remains unbroken). Tell them that you can show them what really happens “inside someone” when they are hit because we can see through the plastic bag.



3. Have the child “gently” punch the gelatin in the bag (guide their hands if “gentle” is difficult for them). Then show them how the “skin” of the bag (i.e. plastic) isn’t broken but the gelatin is. Relate it to someone’s body, helping them to understand that “pain is when the inside of the body is broken underneath the skin. We can’t see through skin, but the same thing is happening when someone is hurt.”
4. Relate “not breaking someone’s insides” (i.e. hitting them) to other rules against breaking things like objects, toys, etc. Also, emphasize their own sad feelings when something of their own is broken...it may be the first connection they make!

Fluidity of Materials Technique (Advanced)



The Fluidity of Materials technique introduced on page 13 can be taken further for both individual children and more challenging classrooms. The key is to add other objects that reduce the amount of control the child needs to show when using the material. Without that guidance children will use the open-ended materials (i.e. water, sand, etc.) in ways that tend to be more aggressive than desired in a classroom.

Some of the examples I will show you are used by many teachers already, but rarely is there full consideration of the concept behind their use. Once

you see the whole continuum for these two examples, you will easily recognize the adjustments you are already making and how they fit into the continuum itself. In addition, it will help you to use the full continuum in a systematic manner so children eventually learn to use the more challenging, open-ended materials.

Know that the continuum for each material just shows the different levels of control needed. Your classroom (or some children) may be able to handle the demands of even the most open-ended materials right from the start of the school year. If that is the case, you should use them. Do not consider any of these levels “inappropriate” for young children. It is the developmental needs of the children involved that will determine what you use.

An additional way to use this approach is to slowly introduce children to higher and higher levels of usage of open-ended materials over time. Start at the easiest end of the continuum, and progress through the stages over the course of the school year until children are handling the most demanding materials with ease.



Only water
Probably not a wise idea in most room 😊
Requires high intrinsic control...



Unusual Open-Ended Props
Items like tubing, etc. require quite a bit of imagination and intrinsic control.



Known Open-Ended Props
Items child has seen before. Moderate level of control needed because open-ended.



Known Props
Items that are known by the child and lend themselves to use with water (i.e. washing items)





Finger-Painting on Table

Probably not a wise idea in most room 😊
Requires high intrinsic control...



On Paper

Defines area and is easier...



On Paper in a Tray

Even more definition of area. Sets boundaries.



With Brush

Removing hands from fluid material
can help many children.



Using Concrete Item

Using a known item like a car can help
suggest "usage" to struggling children.



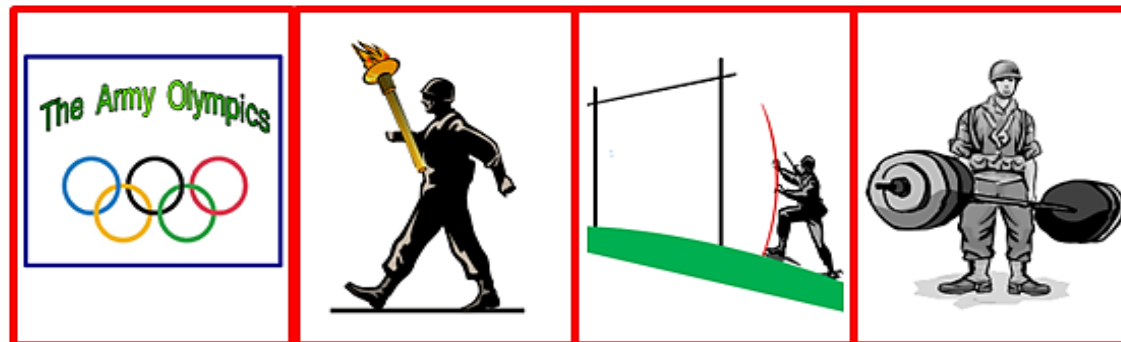
Paint in Sealed Bag

This removes the child from the fluid material.
Taping pictures on the table under the bag will
encourage children to "uncover them". This
gives meaning to even the youngest child!

Aggressive Play Intervention—New Script Version

The same Aggressive Play Intervention for the general classroom (page 12) can be adapted and used for both individual children and small groups in need of more intensive help. **Please note, since I cannot show popular super heroes in this unit due to copyright laws, I will substitute dinosaurs or army men for them in my descriptions.**

New Script Version In this form of the aggressive play intervention, the teacher *assists the children in developing new scripts for the characters that are being used aggressively*. Most children, due to poor play skills, must have some type of visual cue to guide the play and produce story scenarios for them. The scripts most children are using right now are movies, computer games, and videos that are quite violent. You must combat these violent “scripts” with new scripts that show “other things” the toys can do instead.



In some cases, all you have to do is change small parts of the stories they are using (i.e. have them glue the “bad guys” feet to the floor and get the police instead of punching them), and in others cases introduce totally new ideas (i.e. the super heroes can have an “Olympics” to see which group is the strongest). In both cases, make sure to make pictures of the new story. Television is a very strong visual cue, so merely talking children through new ideas will not offset those violent scripts...

Aggressive Play Intervention—Play-Square Version

In this version, you are physically containing the play to a single area. You can use a colored carpet square or any defined area of the classroom the children understand.

Red Square Version

1. Explain to the children that problematic toys can only be played with in a certain area of the room. These children are going to play in this manner no matter where they are or what they are doing, so it is better that you know set a play location so you can help them.



2. Now that you know where these children are, you not only can keep an eye on their play, but you can easily use some of the “creating a new script” techniques described earlier. At first many children will come over because it is new---do not panic when you see this 😊. After a while, though, the children who really do not have aggressive play issues will find other things to do. Then, all you have left are your children who really do not know how to play in any other way.

3. If needed, you may have to combine this approach with the general “schedule approach” described on page 12. This work is time intensive and will take your focus away from the other children to a degree. Set the schedule for this intervention to make it work for you...

Aggressive Play Intervention—Costume Version

In this version, you are visually cueing the children so you can locate them in a large space. This is most useful on the playground.

Costume Version

1. Allow the children to create costume pieces that go with any character or play that is violent in nature. You rarely have to encourage them to do this! They will be thrilled...

2. Tell the children that they can wear the costume pieces when they go outside. This will allow you to quickly see which children are engaging in this play so you can stay nearby to observe and/or re-script as necessary.



3. This technique also serves as a wonderful “stopping point” for play. When the costume comes off, they are “no longer _____” and must stop being that character. This is a nice, concrete way to signal that this type of play is over.

4. This technique can be used in the classroom at times. Just use your judgment since “costuming” usually bring the play to “full body”, something that may not work with some scenarios. The last thing you want to do is take a group of children who were playing with toy dinosaurs fairly well and accidentally encourage them to become dinosaurs themselves!

Aggressive Play Intervention—Cue Conversion

In this version, you will be doing intensive work to help the child understand the difference between real and pretend. This is often needed when the child is very young, developmentally delayed, or the violent character they are pretending to be is a real person (i.e. television wrestling characters).

The goal is to assist the child in understanding *that even if they are pretending to be someone; they are still “there”, and the normal school rules still apply.* Pretending to be someone does not change who you are, it just “hides” it for a moment.

This can be a difficult concept for some children so the lessons and skills involved will have to be repeated in many forms over time. Just keep working at it, and they will eventually understand.

Cue Conversion

1. Use the same “re-scripting” approach introduced on page 22. **This time, however, you need the violent scenarios as well as more peaceful ones to be pictured in sequence.** You will also need multiple photos of the child’s face (as many as needed to cover the chosen character’s face each time it appears) and some sticky-back Velcro. You will use these pictures to directly and visually/physically go back and forth between “real” people (i.e. the child) and the pretend character.



2. First place a small piece of Velcro above the face of the character that the child prefers to be. You must do this for every instance in which this character appears through the whole story.

Then, gather enough photo copies of the child's face (you only need the face itself, not the body) so you have enough to eventually replace the character's face every time it appears. Place a corresponding piece of Velcro on the back of each photo of the child's face so you can stick them on later.



NOTE: The stories you would like to use can be challenging to find sometimes. Not all characters that children love are found in print form. I have used comic books, old library books and other forms of media when I can find them, but I have had to actually construct my own at times. I have found that sticker sheets can be a valuable source of images... They may have to be photocopied and enlarged, but they can really help in a pinch!

3. First go through the violent story with the character's face showing. Talk about the violent actions and whether *they would be permitted in school*.



4. Then go through the same story again but substitute the child's photo/face for their character. Talk about what the character is doing and whether someone pretending to be him *could do that in school*.

Go back and forth between the character's face and the child's photo to help the child understand that even if they are pretending to be someone, "they are still there".

For some children this is a difficult concept and may have to be repeated several times.



5. Once the child seems to have this concept, begin drawing/constructing things **both** the character and the child would be permitted **to pretend in school**. In some cases you may have to acknowledge that the characters can do other things in their job (i.e. real soldiers and police DO use guns), but stress that the rules for school are different. The goal is to help the child construct a new list of “**pretend**” actions they can use **in school**. You may have to visually cue these for the child and remind them of their “solutions” when they are playing. At times, I have even put these solutions on “slap-bracelets”. I can then have the child easily look at their bracelet to remind them of things their character can do.



6. Some children may need work beyond this. You may have to play through scenarios in costume and/or mask to help them understand that “pretending” does not change who they are and which rules they must follow. Holidays that involve dressing up (i.e. Halloween) and class activities that involve the children taking on a character (i.e. fingerplays, class shows, etc.) can be wonderful times to work on this concept outside of this intervention.

Running Formal Programs

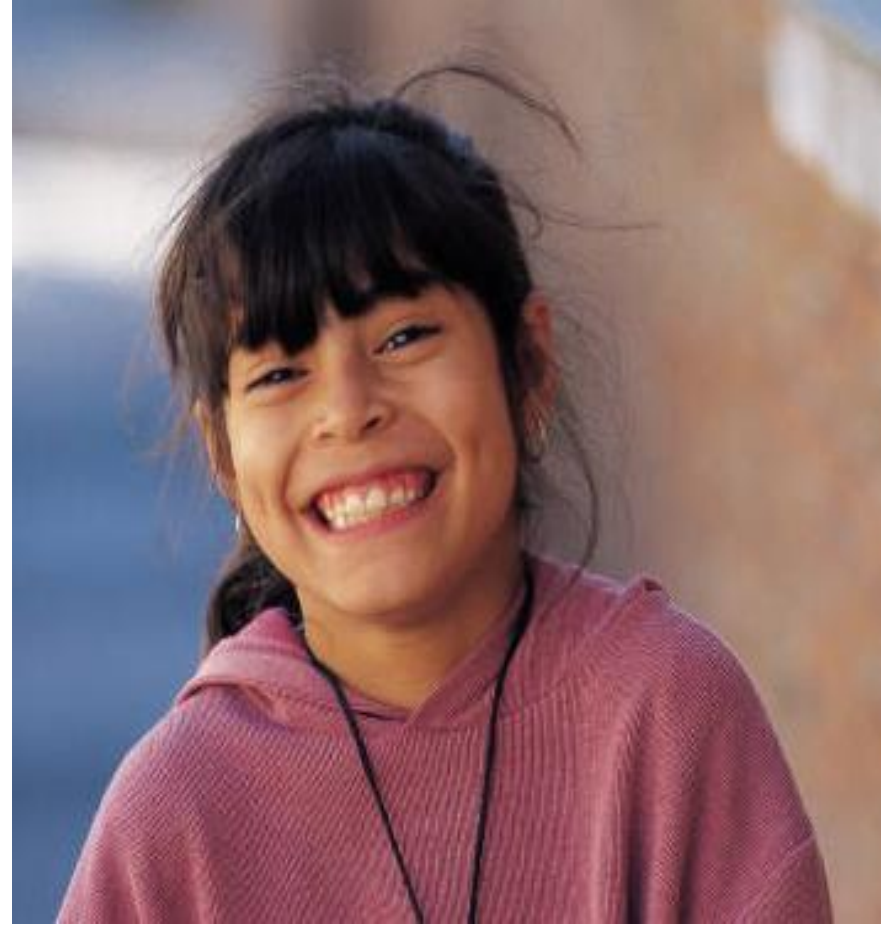
It is not unusual to have children on formal behavior support programs in addition to these interventions. If that is the case, here are some items to keep in mind! Additional pointers can be found in the manual titled, *Supporting Behavior*.

- *Provide this intervention as part of the other program goals whenever possible. It will strengthen the work you do with the child and help you keep to schedule that includes these techniques.
- *Make sure to provide reinforcers and consequences as part of the overall support...just make sure the overall goals are reasonable. This is a hard skill to learn since many of these play scenarios are ingrained habits that will take some time to replace. Set the goals very low and work up from there.
- *Remember that many of these children exhibit aggressive play because their overall play skills are low. *Play intervention will be crucial as part of the program and may be some of the most effective ways to remove this form of play.* A child who can play well can think of other things to do and create non-violent story scenarios.
- *Most of these programs will be more effective if the child is reinforced for using appropriate play choices (i.e. their solutions) rather than consequences for inappropriate play. This does not mean that consequences should not be used at all, but keeping the tone of the program positive will serve you best in the long run.
- *Children this age will need long-term support, teaching, and CUES as reminders. No child this age learns any skill well at the auditory level. Behavior and social skills are the same. Visual cues are a must!

APPENDIX



Happy Girl



Happy Girl



Happy Boy



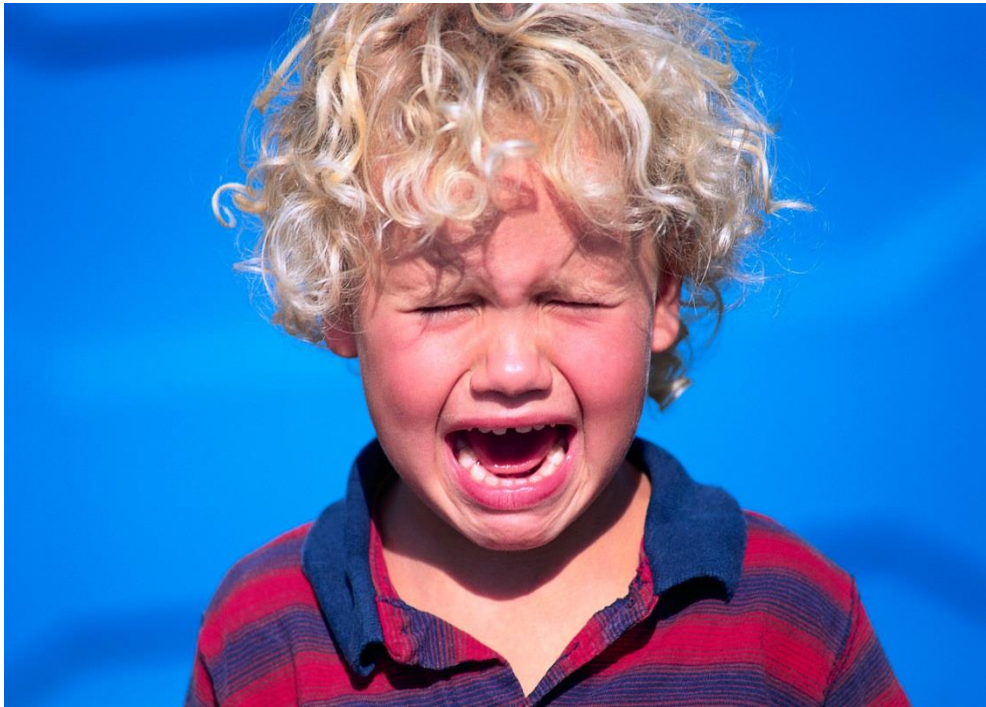
Happy Boy



Sad Girl



Sad Girl



Sad Boy



Sad Boy



Angry Girl



Angry Girl



Angry Boy



Angry Boy



Surprised



Surprised



Scared



Scared



Shy



Shy or Worried



Shy



Be gentle



Be friends



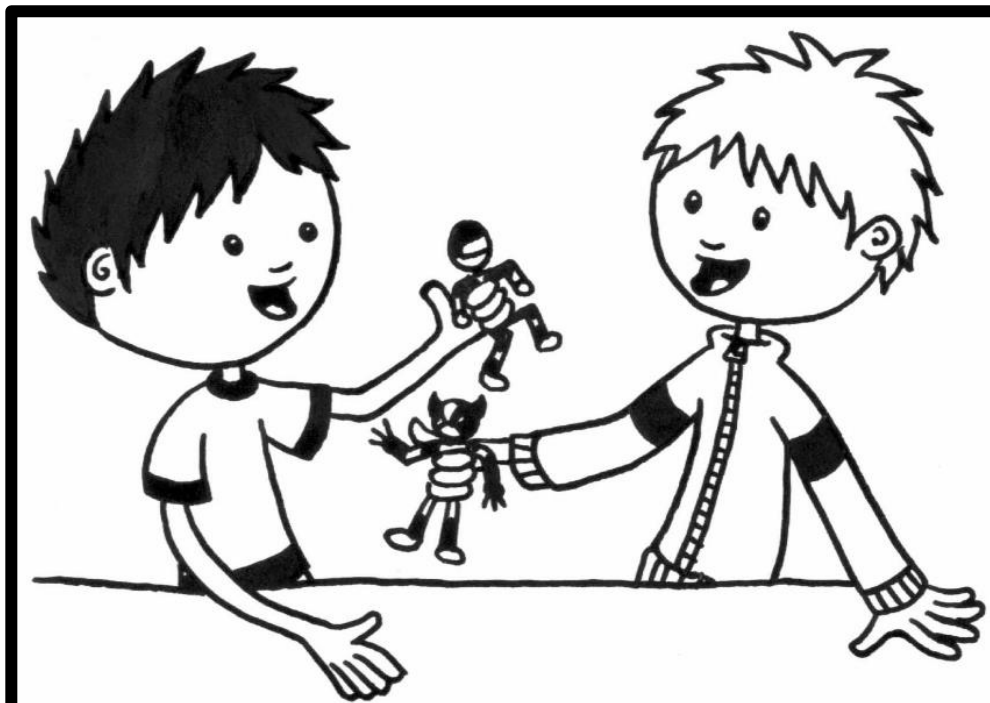
Be friends



Help people



Share



Share



Help people



Help people



Be a good loser



Be a good loser



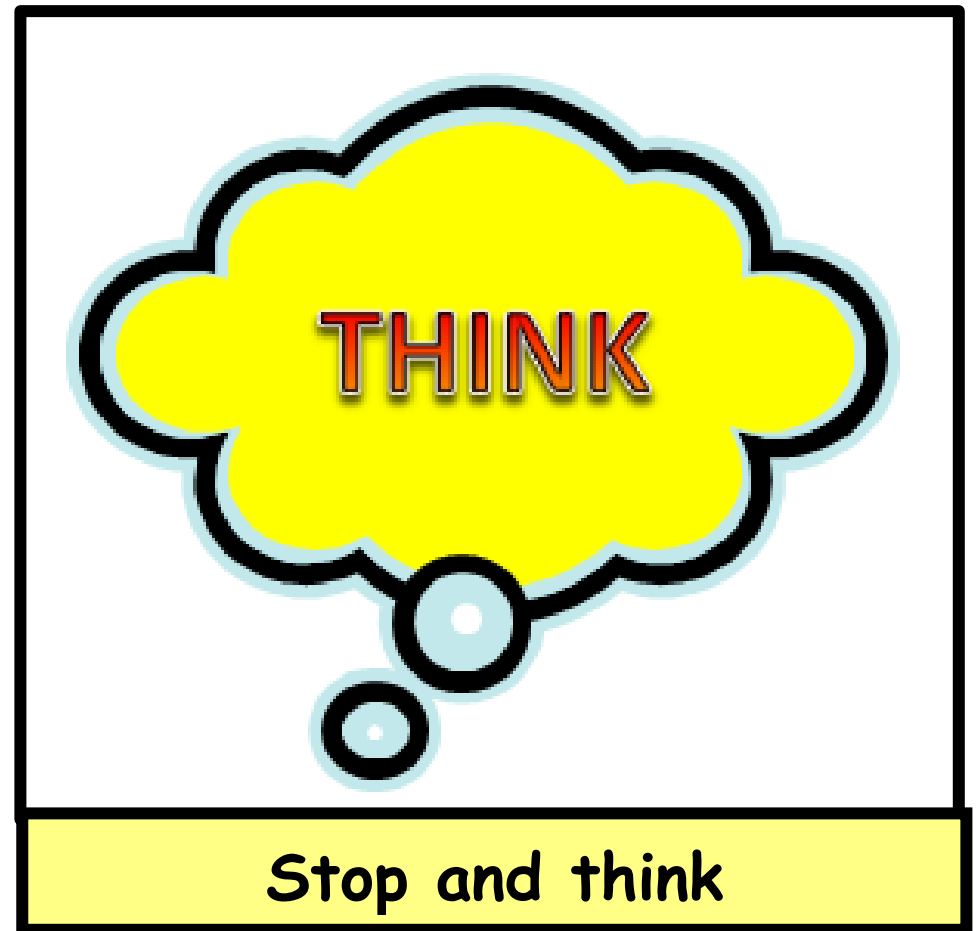
Be kind to people



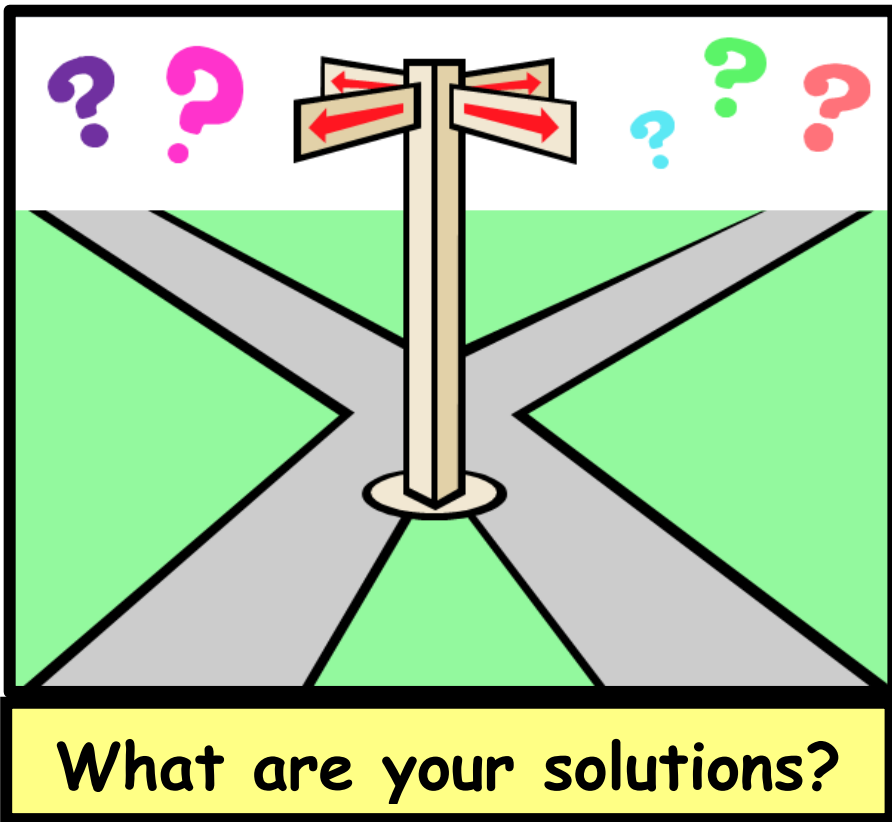
Wait for your turn



Slow down



Stop and think





Breathe deep



Relax