



The Playgroup Altercation – How to Handle it with Finesse and Respect

Part One – Your child is the hitter.

By Judy Arnall

You are having a lovely pleasant chat with a mom you haven't seen in ages and suddenly you hear a loud thud, an ear-piercing scream, and then another mother appears before you clutching a sobbing preschooler with a tear-stained cheek and red eyes. Apparently your son hit her daughter and now the mother and daughter and all eyes from the playgroup are on you as to what you are going to do about it. It's a parent's worst moment and one that is never covered in the parenting books. What is the best way to handle playgroup altercations that leaves everyone feeling content and validated?

Here are six easy steps:

Calming Down

1. Comfort the other child if her parent is not around. Attend to any first aid necessary.
2. Ask for her point of view of what happened. If the parent is confronting you, listen carefully without interruption or judgment. Clarify any misunderstandings by asking questions. Validate her feelings even if you don't agree that the situation happened as she describes. This reduces her defensiveness. You could say, "It is very sad to watch your child being hit."
3. Say that you need to talk to your child and you will be back.
4. Give your child the same opportunity to talk and listen without interruption and judgment. Children have an innate sense of fairness and can often tell you what preceded the altercation. Remember that your child might be upset too and you have to help him calm down. Validate his feelings of anger or frustration. Say, "You were angry that she took your truck?"

Restitution

5. When everyone is calm, go back to the other parent and her child and see if your child is ready to apologize. If his is, that's great. If he isn't, don't force it. It doesn't matter who is right or who is wrong as most altercations involve fault from both children. Ideally, both children should apologize to each other, but it rarely happens. You are concerned only with teaching your child social manners and not the other child. Model apologizing by

saying it yourself, such as “I’m sorry that my son hit your daughter. We will deal with it.” This is all the other parent needs to hear. She has her “social bandage” – the apology, and your assurance that you will follow through with your child. You are not telling her how you will “deal with it” and that’s okay. Modeling an apology shows your child how to make amends but respects his emotional status by not forcing him to do it when he is clearly not in that mindset yet. Sometimes the situation demands immediate apologies because of time constraints, but children are not emotionally ready to do so yet. If that’s the case, then your apology for your child’s behavior should suffice.

Follow-Up

6. Here is the “We will deal with it” part. Do not punish your child! Away from the crowd and staring eyes, help him to discover techniques for handling his anger other than hitting. Walking away, breathing, and counting to ten are all ways to handle anger that even a three-year-old can handle. Remember that you will show them these feeling management techniques many times. Children up to 12 instinctually hit, bite, push and throw things at other children and need many, many practices of handling anger with either using their words or walking away like adults do. Assure your child of your unconditional love and your expectations that he will make a better choice the next time he is angry at playgroup. Supervise him closely. Nothing gets a group of parents madder than dealing with a parent who ignores her child’s anti-social behavior in groups of children.

If another altercation ensues with the same child or another child, recognize that your child is having a bad day and go home. Have some cuddle time and one-on-one attention time because perhaps that is what your child needs most of all. Don’t forget to give yourself some pampering too! You are an excellent parent dealing with a challenging day.

Next month – Part Two - Your child is the victim.

Judy Arnall is an international award-winning peaceful parenting speaker, and bestselling author of “Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery” www.professionalparenting.ca 403-714-6766 or jarnall@shaw.ca

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