What to say when your toddler hits you or the baby

"My three-year-old just hit his baby sister on the head with a toy. I grabbed him and shouted. What should I say in that moment?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"NO! We don't hit! How would YOU like it?"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I won't let you hit. I'm moving you here." Then, once the baby is safe: "You're cross she took your car."

The moment a toddler hits a baby, the instinct is to meet force with force: grab, shout, sometimes smack. It feels like teaching. The research on early hitting and on physical punishment suggests it teaches the opposite.

What is known, and at what age

Hitting peaks early. A study that followed 572 families from when their babies were five months old asked mothers about physical aggression at seventeen, thirty and forty-two months. Most children showed some; only about one in seven followed a high, rising path. Having younger siblings was one of the strongest early predictors of being in that high group. That is a link in one study, not a verdict on your child.

The NHS says most young children occasionally bite, hit or push another child, that this does not mean your child will grow up to be aggressive, and that hitting back may suggest to your child that it's acceptable. A review of studies covering more than 160,000 children found that spanking was linked with a higher risk of harmful outcomes for children, not with better behaviour. These are links, not proof of cause.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests praising your child when they are kind and gentle.

What the words do

Take 1 shouts, and its question ("How would YOU like it?") is one a three-year-old cannot answer. Take 2 does three things in order. It stops the hand with a short, flat limit and a move ("I'm moving you here"). It turns to the baby. And once she is safe, it gives him the words for what he felt. Later, when he is calm, one sentence is enough: "When you're cross, you can stamp your feet." Then watch for gentle moments, and say so when you see one.

If you live in two homes

Children in two homes may bring a fight from one house to the other, or hit at the changeover, when feelings run high. Keep the same limit and the same words in your home. If the hitting happens at both homes, tell the other parent directly, adult to adult, and agree on one rule both homes use.

In the UK

The NHS temper tantrums page says most young children occasionally bite, hit or push, that this does not mean a child will grow up aggressive, and not to hit back. If you are seriously concerned, talk to your health visitor or GP. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.