



CD for Parents: How Do I Respond When Other Children Are Being Mean to Mine?

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“Sometimes when we are around family members or friends who do not have consistent behavior expectations for their children, their child has a tendency to be mean to my child. My first reaction is for “Mama Bear” to come out and jump all over that child. Usually though, I do nothing. What would be an appropriate and helpful way to respond to this type of behavior with other people’s children?”

BREATHE. As always, the first step to handling difficult behaviors is to pause and breathe. The skill of composure helps us to turn off the negative responses to our situations and refocus our energy in a positive direction. Take a moment to breathe deeply and calm yourself before responding to the situation.

ATTRIBUTE POSITIVE INTENT. When someone else’s child acts in a hurtful way towards your child, stay in your place of calm and attribute positive intent to the misbehavior. You do this by saying to yourself something like, “Oops, they must not know how to use kind words,” rather than “I can’t believe they are acting like this...they should know better!” Positive intent helps you stay in a problem-solving state and helps you to offer those problem-solving skills to children. You can even demonstrate this skill to your child and the other child when you approach them about their behavior. While you might be tempted to

ignore the behavior altogether, or choose a frustrated or angry response, instead begin with something like, “Oops! It looks like you may not know how to use helpful behavior. I will help you, so we can all stay safe.” Remember to use a sincere tone, not a sarcastic one. This isn’t a time for sarcasm or shaming, it’s a time for teaching.

USE ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE. In Conscious Discipline, we learn that assertive language is the voice of no doubt...it is what it is. To practice an assertive voice, you can recite something like, “The sky is blue, the grass is green, you may not hit...hitting hurts.” Using a formula like this helps to keep your tone from sounding passive or aggressive. Passive language would sound like, “Let’s not hit, please.” Please and thank you are polite words we use when someone does a favor for us. For example, “Could you please grab a bottle of water for me too?” Using the word “please” implies a question. The person you are speaking to can choose to respond with yes or no. When you are giving directions or relaying a behavior expectation to a child, you are simply stating what *is*.

You are not asking a question and their behavior is not a favor to you, it is an expectation. So, instead of, “Let’s not push, please,” use an assertive phrase like this, “You may not push. Pushing is not safe. You may use a helpful touch like this or you may keep your hands to yourself like this” and then demonstrate what “helpful touch” and “hands to yourself” look like. Also, avoid aggressive language and tone. An aggressive tone sounds loud and forceful, with the intent of talking “over” someone so that they have no choice but to listen. You can even deliver an assertive phrase in an aggressive tone. To avoid this, remember the formula from above. “The sky is blue, the grass is green, you may not hit... hitting hurts.” Aggressive language comes as an angry response, with the intent to punish. Aggressive words may sound like, “Hey, you better stop it right now! Don’t you dare push my child!” or “Quit being a brat! No one will play with you if you act like that!” Unlike passive or aggressive language, assertive language stays calm and helps facilitate problem solving.

YOU MAY, YOU MAY, YOU MAY NOT. A helpful phrase for using assertive language and setting limits is the “You may ____, you may ____, you may not ____” formula. For example, if another child is pushing your child, you can use an assertive tone and set limits by saying, “You may use gentle touch like this (demonstrate), you may keep your hands to yourself

like this (demonstrate), you may not push.” Using this phrasing helps to paint a picture with your words and lets the child know exactly what the limits and expectations are.

GIVE YOUR CHILD A VOICE. Help your own child discover and use their own “big voice” by demonstrating the skill in the moment. Ask your child, “Did you like it when _____ hit you?” When they respond with a “no,” Then help them with the language to communicate limits. Practice with your child and have them repeat after you, “_____, I don’t like it when you hit me. Hitting hurts. Keep your hands to yourself.” When your child is able to say this with a confident, assertive tone, they are ready to try it with the other child. Have your child and the other child stand in front of you and guide your child in using their assertive language. Guide the other child in a response, “Can you do that?” If they say no or refuse to participate, you can have your child not play with them and say something like, “If you can’t play safe, then _____ will not be able to play with you because it is my job to keep him/her safe.” A wonderful tool to help teach your child the skill of assertive language is the book, Shubert’s Big Voice by Dr. Becky Bailey. This book is available on the Conscious Discipline website.

YOU’VE GOT THIS! Parenting is tough enough with your own children, but when other children are acting in a hurtful way toward your child, it’s even more easy to lose your cool or become frustrated. It’s also difficult when you have other parents or family members watching you. In these moments, remember your own commitments. You have every right as a parent to set healthy boundaries for how others treat your children and to teach your children how to do the same for themselves. Take a deep breath and know that you’ve got this! You can do it! As always, I wish you well!

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As a teacher, Amanda has experience in preschool, pre-kindergarten, elementary, and middle school classrooms, in both general and special education capacities. Amanda has personally implemented and helped to implement Conscious Discipline in her own home, preschool and pre-k classrooms, elementary classrooms, middle school classrooms, special education inclusion and pull-out settings and in church childcare/daycare settings. Amanda loves working with and helping all groups and individuals along their Conscious Discipline journey.

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