

## “He became wild”

*Helping children rein in aggressive behavior takes patience and teamwork*

BY CECELIA LEONG

**W**henever four-year-old “Luis” didn’t get what he wanted, he would throw tantrums and bite or slap children and teachers. When therapist Laura Rios of Foothill Family Services in Pasadena met him, he was in danger of being expelled from preschool.

Child care mental health consultant Dr. Grace Manning-Orenstein, of The Link to Children in Alameda County, helps prevent such expulsions, but she acknowledges that “just one or two aggressive children can exhaust a teacher. They interfere with (teachers’) ability to respond to the other children.”

Stories of two children show some strategies teachers use to help children overcome aggressive behavior.

### LUIS: “A lot of help”

Faced with Luis’s outbursts, says teacher Elsa (who doesn’t want her last name used), “I was feeling a bit of inadequacy. It was frustrating to see him hurting and not be able to help.” When their efforts to work with Luis failed, Elsa and the other teachers at the El Monte City School District preschool asked for help from their supervisors and from Rios.

#### **Building a positive relationship**

Children like Luis “need a lot of help from teachers,” says Rios. “Unfortunately, many teachers, when faced with a child who curses them out or spits on them, will



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pull away.” Rios first asked teachers to work on building a positive relationship with Luis. When he was playing happily, a teacher would approach him and show interest: “What are you building? A castle? You seem very proud of your castle!”

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***“It was frustrating to see him hurting and not be able to help.”***

—Elsa, a teacher at El Monte Preschool

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### CALMING AGGRESSION

Teachers in these two stories used a range of strategies:

- Working with a mental health consultant
- Working as a team with other staff
- Working as a team with parents
- Identifying the need behind the aggression
- Validating feelings
- Providing outlets for anger and upset feelings
- Giving positive attention
- Rewarding good behavior

#### **Working as a team**

Luis’s outbursts wore teachers down, says Elsa, but “when we got frustrated, we didn’t want Luis to feel it.” So, with the help of their supervisor, the teachers figured out a plan. When a teacher needed a break, says Elsa, “we would pass a dinosaur puppet to another (teacher),” who then took over with Luis. When Luis had a tantrum, they separated him from the other children and one teacher stayed with Luis.

#### **Validating feelings**

Rios encouraged teachers to validate Luis’ feelings: “My friend, I can see you are angry.” They created spe-

cial areas to help all the kids manage their emotions. A pop-up tent with pillow and blankets provided a “calm-down” area. Kids could pound and smash Play Doh and Gack at the “anger table.”

### **Focusing on the positive**

Months later, Luis’ behavior improved. “It took time,” says Elsa, “but we were all on the same page. Consistency, praise, focusing on the positives, lots of small baby steps.” When Luis didn’t get his way, he might still look angry and stomp away, but he was no longer lashing out physically.

## **JOHN: Connecting with parents**

Two years ago, Teri Stewart was teaching a special education class in San Jose. In November, “John” arrived. In just two months of kindergarten, he had disrupted classes and bitten and kicked his teacher and other staff.

### **Going wild**

Stewart asked John’s dad to come to school with him at first. The first week, Dad was there all three hours and John was “good as gold.” By the third week, when his father left after an hour, John threw a pencil at the aide. Stewart came over and crouched down to talk to him. John kicked her and flailed his arms. Stewart tried to coax him apart from the rest of the children, but he “became wild”—hit her, kicked her again, and ran away. When the principal was called in, John spat at her and ripped her shirt. The principal and the nurse then removed John from the room.

### **Asking parents for help**

Stewart didn’t want John to be expelled, so she asked for time to meet with his parents. When they came in, Stewart learned they had gone through a divorce. John spent the week with his dad and weekends with his mom.

After asking about each parent’s home routines, Stewart thought she found a clue. John’s mother, like many parents, was sending John to his bedroom when he misbehaved. But sometimes these “time-outs” lasted

## **“FIND OUT WHAT IS BEHIND THE BEHAVIOR”**

Children act aggressively for many reasons, says Dr. Grace Manning-Orenstein, a mental health consultant to child care programs. Girls as well as boys can be aggressive, but it’s more common in boys. In order to respond effectively, says Jeanie Harmon of Santa Rosa Junior College, it’s important to do careful observation and “find out what is behind the behavior.” Common causes include:

- **Stage of development**, when children haven’t learned how to use words to say “I don’t like that” or “I want that toy”
- **Temperament** that is very active, intense, or quick to react—or simply excess energy
- **Lack of knowledge** of appropriate ways of communicating
- **Physical conditions** like allergies, earaches, or lack of sleep
- **Inappropriate expectations**, such as forcing young children to sit still for long periods
- **Stressed-out parents** or a chaotic home
- **Major family changes** such as divorce or a new baby
- **Violent neighborhoods**
- **Developmental problems** such as ADHD or Asperger’s syndrome

for hours. “Aha!” thought Stewart. Because John needed extra reassurance and connection, he responded to long “time-outs” by “exploding like dynamite.”

### **Creating consistency**

John’s mother was glad to try something different—all three adults agreed to use the same approach so John would have a consistent experience. Stewart suggested using rewards—with praise and encouragement—for positive behavior. The parents suggested using toys that hooked on key chains as a reward—John loved them. Teachers also used a sticker book at school.

By the end of the school year, Stewart says, John was snuggling on her lap and giving her hugs. She now remembers him fondly as “a super kid!”

## **TO LEARN MORE**

- *Activities that help manage aggression*, (video), [www.aplaceofourown.org/watch\\_video.php?type=field&id=81&pos=0](http://www.aplaceofourown.org/watch_video.php?type=field&id=81&pos=0)
- Resources on aggression at <http://parentcenter.babycenter.com>. Type “aggression” into the search box.
- Links to materials on aggression at [www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,123,00.html](http://www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,123,00.html)
- To find mental health consultation for early childhood programs in your area, contact your county mental health department or First 5 agency.

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