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## When and How to Intervene with Children

I had a request to follow-up from last week's bit on not intervening with children to give more information about when and how to intervene as I did acknowledge it can be necessary. Knowing what that looks like can help in many situations so you aren't left second guessing your own involvement.

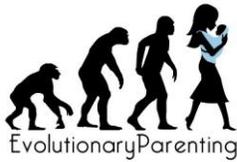
### When to Intervene

The first question is even when you need to intervene and the problem is that you are going to be balancing cultural assumptions surrounding involvement and what is best from a child's development perspective. So I will start here by saying that if you are in a situation where culture dictates you really need to get involved (e.g., you work in a daycare or school, you're with others you know will expect intervention) then you can, but make sure you do it in the least intrusive way possible and that is in the 'How' section below.

If you have the chance to sit back and assess when is best to intervene, then let's take a look at the times when that would be appropriate.

1. When there is a risk of a child getting really hurt. It's hard for us to qualify getting hurt, but getting a pinch or a push from one small child is not going to truly 'hurt' our kids (unless they're at the top of stairs or something), but a child who has found a knitting needle or has a bat is someone that could do quite a bit of harm and requires intervention. You have to use your best judgment, but I recommend thinking about it in terms of how you would react if the end result was due to some accident done by the child him or herself. If it would be a cuddle and on their way, they're okay and you don't need to intervene. If you're looking at a bloody mess or worry about a trip to the doctor, intervene.
2. When there is a risk of deep emotional hurt. This is likely going to be with older children, but I have seen some very cruel behaviour in younger and younger children in some schools which is distressing to say the least. If you witness children being socially cruel in ways that try to get the other child to feel bad about themselves then you need to step in. We call this *relational aggression* in the literature and it can have more negative consequences for the affected child than physical aggression yet we often intervene less because there isn't the physical display for it.
3. Bullying. Any time you see multiple children ganging up on one it is time to intervene. These are not character-building events, but times to make it clear to all that this is not socially appropriate behaviour.

That's about it. The rest of the time you can pretty much let the cards fall as they may. However, this doesn't mean you won't engage *after the fact*. This is crucial because often our role in these interactions (if it exists at all) is emotional support after. We offer the chance for our kids to think about

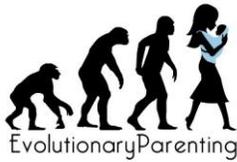


other people's behaviours and their own in a very non-judgmental way, but simply helping them process what has happened. This brings us to the how of it all...

## How to Intervene

As should be clear from above, there are really two types of interventions – in the moment and the after emotional support. For the first type – in the moment – it depends on what you are looking at as to how to intervene so I will break it down for each type discussed above.

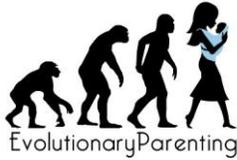
1. Socially required. In these cases you are intervening when you typically wouldn't otherwise. This means you have two children who are fighting but no one is at risk of getting hurt, physically or emotionally. When you intervene here, the key is to only serve as a facilitator. You are not making judgments, you are not telling anyone how they feel, but you are eliciting that type of information from the children if they are old enough to provide it (if not, you can simply label what you saw and the emotions and let the children move away to play elsewhere). In this case, you would want to get each child to tell you what's happening from their perspective and ask them to explain to the other how they feel. No forced apologies or playing together after, just explain their perspective and emotional state and leave it at that. Your presence will likely stop any further escalation and if they walk away still angry, fine. Your job is not to make it all better, but to get those emotions out and in the open. If you feel you need to, you can move on with each child to the post-moment emotional support. Sentences to remember:
  - a. "[Name of child 1] can you go first to tell me what happened?" followed by asking the same of child 2.
  - b. "How did that make you feel?"
  - c. "What did you want [child X] to do instead?"
2. Risk of physical injury. Obviously the very first step is to stop whatever the risk is either by removing the child or the element that would cause harm. Then the first thing is not to get angry or deride the child for acting out because the child likely didn't know they were really putting someone at risk. Even when it can seem obvious, when we are in a heightened emotional state, we are not in the best place for being rational. The first thing is to ask them what happened and how they felt. Then you want to use your questions to guide them to the possible harm they could have caused and how they would have felt if that had happened (and it's okay if they say "fine", it just gives you an opening to acknowledge how angry and hurt they must be feeling). Then you have to help them find other ways in the future to express their anger that doesn't put people at risk, reminding them that it's okay to be angry and feel that way, but the problem lays with hurting others. This would also require some post-moment emotional processing with the other child as well.
3. Risk of emotional harm. This is a trickier one because you really need to ensure that you have time with both kids. Who you talk to first will depend on the need. If the child who was harmed or risked harm is in clear need of support, start there. If not, you may choose to start with the other child to



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ensure that harm doesn't pass to another kid in the meantime. Looking at each child individually, you can see how to work with them:

- a. For the child who was harmed, you will do the post-moment emotional processing, but you will also have to add some work to discuss what they may have heard and how to get them to understand that the harm they feel is a reflection of the other child, not them. This is the hardest part of emotional harm – it becomes so personal and we can't unhear what was said and so it can stick with us and take root, something we don't want for our kids. I find that for most children in this situation, one of the best ways to help them move beyond any harm is to relate to it yourself. Even if you have to make up a story (though in our society it's highly unlikely we haven't been exposed to cruel words) to give them the idea that they aren't alone and they don't have to believe it. Make clear you don't believe what was said about them and ask if they believe what was said about you. A good game to help them learn that saying things doesn't make it true is to then get silly and have each of you say things that clearly aren't true and ask the child if they are after each statement. For example, you might say, "I am a unicorn" and then ask the child if saying it made it true. Keep doing this until the child is feeling better. (You can also teach the child to come up with a mantra to repeat back to anyone who starts saying hurtful things. A child who has someone try to hurt them, but who turns it into a game by responding, "Yeah, and you're a bear" can often diffuse the situation and take away the power of the other person. This doesn't address the hurt of the other so as the adult you need to be aware, but can help the victim in these moments feel better.)
- b. For the child doing the harm, you will have to tread carefully because there is likely a lot of hurt in the child and that is why they are acting out. Few kids are truly so callous, but we can become quite mean when we are feeling hurt ourselves. Always start by asking what happened and you may get some lying to try and justify the behaviour. Don't dwell on the lies, simply call them out (e.g., "I know that's not true, but let's move on"); this shows the child that you are not going to go down a rabbit hole and also that you have information they don't think you have. Ask them how they felt saying those things and also how the other person felt. Ask them how they would feel if someone said something that hurtful to them. When you get to this stage, you may get faced with, "Well, X says that to me all the time" and this becomes the root of the behaviour. Depending on how ingrained it is, you may have the child explain they don't care when they hear it, but you can still focus on saying it's okay to be hurt by it and you don't believe it's true of them. You may find they're open to the game played above about saying things that aren't true, but they may not be there. At the end of the day, this could be the beginning of delving deeper, but for the purpose of that talk, you may need to settle on the idea that you don't believe they want to hurt people deep down and you will continue to help them not do that. This serves two purposes. One, it tells them you don't believe they are bad which is likely one of the



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- feelings driving this behaviour. Two, it makes it clear that behaviour isn't okay, but that you will not shun them, but help them.
4. Bullying. Responding to the victim here is similar to above with emotional hurt so I won't address it again. Addressing multiple children who are bullying is going to also be similar to the emotional hurt above, but you will need to address them separately. Often there is one child leading and you'll have greater success with the others if they are taken away from the other child for the discussion. For the one who is mainly leading, you will likely face the same defiance as the child who engages in emotional hurt (after all, bullying is often a similar event, but with the power of numbers behind it) and you will again have to stand the ground that you don't think the child is bad, but you will work with them to find other ways to express whatever is brewing inside.

The final bit is how to cope post-moment for the emotional processing. This is actually quite simple and also hard because it requires so much restraint from us adults. The key here is to get the child's perspective of what happened (e.g., "Can you tell me what happened over there?") and to work through why the events unfolded as they did without us giving our own ideas. That is, for each event in the description, you include the 'why' question (e.g., "So Sarah hit you. Why do you think she did that? How do you think she was feeling?" or "So you yelled loudly. Why did you do that? How were you feeling?"). When you face the "I don't know" as an answer with respect to the other person, don't try and provide an answer, but instead ask the child to think about what they would feel in that situation. When they label it, just let it sit, don't recommend any course of action. After going through the entire event, ask how the child feels now and if they are okay, let it be. If they are sad, ask how you can help. That's it.

It's important to acknowledge that we often want a perfect solution to these events, which is why we push for apologies and providing the answers to our questions when the kids don't have them. But the most effective means of learning is through our own awareness so the best we can do is provide the questions and let the children get there in their own time. It likely won't be the first time, but over time and experience, they will get it and that will be a wonderful experience for them.

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*Tracy Cassels, PhD is the Director of Evolutionary Parenting, a science-based, attachment-oriented resource for families on a variety of parenting issues. In addition to her online resources, she offers one-on-one support to families around the world and is regularly asked to speak on a variety of issues from sleep to tantrums at conferences and in the media. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children.*