Behavior At-a-Glance: Hitting

Background: Understanding Hitting Behavior

Hitting is a common behavior among young children as they develop language, impulse control, and emotional regulation skills. Many young children will use physical actions like hitting to express frustration, seek attention, or communicate needs when they lack the words to do so. After reviewing and trying these strategies, if hitting increases in frequency or intensity, reach out for support. After trying these strategies, you can seek additional support at OhioPromise.org/EC-COE.

1 | Prepare

Considerations

Several factors could be affecting a child's behavior:

- Limited communication skills
- Could be sick, tired, or hungry
- Calming strategies not shown yet
- Hitting may be effective in other settings
- Positive behaviors not yet directly taught

Communication

What are all ways this child makes their needs known? Build on communication skills such as:

- Eye gaze
- Gestures, signs, sounds, words
- Taking your hand and leading you
- Picture cards or a device

2 | Observe

Before

What do you notice before the child starts to hit? Some examples could be:

- The child was told it was time to go potty
- A caregiver just dropped the child off in the classroom
- A friend grabbed a toy from the child

During

Write down exactly what the hitting looks like. Here are some ideas:

- The child used an open hand to slap a teacher's arm
- The child used their body to knock a peer down
- The child took hard plastic toys and hit a friend on the head

After

What happens after? How did others respond? Some things that might be happening:

- An adult told the child, "No hitting, that's not nice…"
- A peer was hit and dropped a toy the child wanted
- A caregiver came back into the room to help them stop hitting

Family Connection

Early care and education professionals can partner with and families to share concerns and work on solutions together. Ask what happens before, during, and after hitting in each setting and learn how caregivers respond. Match your strategies for consistency, using the same positive approaches. Some questions to ask are:

1. "Are you seeing hitting behavior? When does it tend to happen and what does it look like?"
2. "When your child hits, how do you or other caregivers usually respond?"
3. "Have there been any big life changes or differences in your child's usual routines?"

3 | Strong Starts

Before going in depth on a particular plan, start with these recommendations:

1. Create a fun and engaging learning space with predictable routines
2. Plan opportunities for meaningful connections with children and adults
3. Aim for 5 positive interactions for every correction you give
4. Be the example of how to communicate positively with words and actions

4 | Support with Strategies

Attention/Connection

- Teach the child how to communicate and connect with you using words, signs, picture cards, or gestures
- React calmly to hitting; praise/give big reactions to positive communication
- Connect with the child before routines that are usually challenging

Escape/Avoidance

- Check if the activity is too hard for the child to do or if a skill is missing
- Teach the child to ask for a break
- Use First/Then language to pair a harder task with a preferred activity.

Tangible- Access to Item or Activity

- If hitting gets the child an item, set up planned opportunities to practice requesting
- For physical play, set clear boundaries on what is and is not okay
- Give access to a desired toy or activity after the child completes a tough task or uses positive behaviors

Sensory

- Add movement breaks to the routine
- Offer sensory alternatives like hitting a drum or clacking blocks together
- Keep the child's hands busy with play dough, tubes, stamps, or art

Quick-Reference: Strategies by Function

Function	What to Look For	What to Work On	How to Reinforce
Escape	Hitting when trying to leave an activity	"Break, please"	Give a short break after a communication attempt
Attention	Watching for your response after hitting	Tapping or saying, "Look at me"	Respond positively to gentle touch and communication
Tangible	Hitting a friend holding a toy they want	"My turn"/ Wait time	Give the item after communicating and waiting a short time
Sensory	Hitting while excited or overstimulated	Calming ideas or use sensory items	Calm with the child or provide sensory items

5 | Reflect and Revise

Changing behavior such as hitting takes time. Try to remain calm as you support the child's learning. Reflect on the questions below, revisit the steps above, and seek additional support if needed.

- ☐ "What changes have we seen since using our strategies consistently for at least 2 weeks?"
- ☐ "What are some additional strategies we could put in place to reduce hitting?"
- ☐ "How have we been reinforcing the positive behaviors we wish to see?"