

# Cruelty in children may alarm parents, but such impulses are usually natural phases of growing up

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**J**OHNNY, 11, suddenly can't resist teasing his sister until she wails.

Shirley and her nine-year-old friends gang up against one heartbroken playmate and exclude her from their "secret" club.

Betsy, four, terrorizes her beloved cat by tossing it into the bathtub, laughing merrily at the frantic animal's panic.

"Are all children born with a cruel streak?" bewildered parents ask when a child who is usually kind suddenly seems to take great pleasure in inflicting pain.

Children are born neither kind nor cruel, but with a variety of aggressive impulses related to our instinct for survival. It is natural for a child to grab at anything he sees, whether it is food, or a fly, or a cat's tail. And it is natural for him to hit against anything that gets in his way, that hurts or displeases him.

Our first task in training each child to grow into a kind, responsible person is to protect him against hurting himself and others, not by suppressing his natural feelings but by diverting them into safe and acceptable outlets. The earlier we start, the easier it is for the child.

The child grows naturally in size, but he does not grow naturally into civilized behavior. It is a mistake to dismiss lightly all hurtful or aggressive behavior as "just a phase" that children will outgrow automatically. But before we label a child's acts "cruel," we must take into consideration his age, the circumstances in which he behaves aggressively, and how long his hurtful impulses last.

Teddy, a serene friendly baby, suddenly became the terror of the sand pile at a year and a half, inflicting sharp bites on any child who toddled within range. This cannibalistic activity did not indicate a hidden cruel streak. Many children, though by no means all, go through a biting stage when getting teeth. It is natural for them to use this interesting new equipment without realizing that biting can be painful. Often they will bite a child they dearly love, just as they will give a vigorous hug, and in much the same sense that a grownup says, "You're sweet enough to eat!"

Teddy's mother was wise enough not to spank him, which only would have outraged and confused him. Instead, she was alert to stop him each time he was about to set teeth in another child, and invited him to bite himself to discover that it hurt. Within a few days he had learned his lesson.

**T**HE CHILD of four or over, who bites, trips, hits, or hurts others without apparent cause, is a different and most serious problem: he *knows* that he is inflicting pain. He must be stopped, but the important thing is to discover the reason for his behavior.

By being destructive or cruel, he is telling the world he feels the lack of something—security, love, recognition, admiration. If he can't draw attention to his need any other way, he gets it by annoying others, whether he is a kindergartener or teen-ager.

Primitive feelings and cruel, direct action most

often show up in younger children confronted with a new baby, though sibling rivalry is the basis of many hostilities in older children, too. When I was a young mother, I was horrified at the "cruel streak" my older child was showing when he pushed and hurt the baby. I scolded him sharply—and taught myself a lesson:

My scolding did not make the boy feel like being gentle and kind to his little brother. It only made him feel more displaced and jealous.

Just recently I heard a three-year-old put this forlorn feeling into revealing words: "Take baby back to the hospital! We don't need her!"

Four-year-old Janie explained her plot to put the new baby into the garbage can: "Don't want him! Throw him away!"

These are strong emotions. It is senseless to pretend they are not there, aren't important, or to counter them with: "Of course, we want the darling baby. We love him!" It is equally ineffective to scold: "How can you be so bad to the good baby?"

Such words neither protect the baby nor help a child stirred by longing for his lost spotlight. The best way to ease a child past such cruel impulses is to acknowledge them frankly: "I know how you feel. Sometimes you love the baby. But sometimes you hate him because he takes a lot of time, just as you did before you were big enough to help me. But I cannot let you hurt him—ever. Now, the next thing is to pick up the toys [in order to give the older child something to do with or for you] and then we'll be ready to read you a story when the baby goes to sleep."

Above all, it is important *not* to make a child feel wicked when he is in the grip of a natural emotion. Our job in dealing with cruel impulses is twofold. First, we must act as the child's conscience until he has his own to control him. Second, we must understand that aggressions must have some outlet and divert them into harmless channels.

**P**ART OF THE VALUE of toys is to release a child's feelings about himself and others. Susan, who never has had a hand lifted against her, suddenly begins to "play mother" or "play teacher" by savagely spanking her dolls. She is not showing an irresponsibly cruel, destructive streak. She is finding a way to express her pent-up anger against something that bothers her. Watch such rough play carefully. It usually will tell what is making your child angry or resentful.

Very few children are deliberately cruel to animals. The baby yanking the cat's tail is more inspired by curiosity than by cruelty: What will the cat do? Will the tail come off? Am I stronger than the cat?

Bigger children take a certain experimental interest in what will happen when a mouse is flung to a cat, or a cat into the tub. Others are more confused than callously cruel. Parents swat mosquitoes, kill flies and snakes. So what's wrong with stamping on a frog or pulling off a butterfly's wings?

Four-year-old Tommy who tries to run over the kitten with his tricycle is not necessarily a little "sadist." But if Tommy at six, or over, still takes

pleasure in tormenting animals, something probably is disturbing him seriously. If such cruelty persists, it is a matter for professional help.

Some parents shrink from taking a problem to a child-guidance clinic, feeling that they are failures or somehow inferior as parents if they need such help. No one should feel that way.

If parents blame themselves for every aspect of a child's behavior, they assume an excessive and unrealistic burden of guilt. In dealing with cruel and destructive traits, we must remember that the present generation is growing up in an age of violence in which life, justice, and honor have been held cheap.

This cannot but affect the developing child. Today's parents need all the help they can get from each other, from spiritual advisors, and from professionals trained in child care.

On the other hand, do not feel that extraordinary steps are required every time Brother and Sister scuffle, squabble, tease, and fill the house with anguished complaints. Teasing can be carried to a cruel extent, but it seldom is.

Of course, the teasing of a slow, handicapped, or otherwise unfortunate child is an entirely different matter. This is cruelty, and adults must react strongly.

At present we are properly much concerned with juvenile delinquency. Its causes involve so many factors that no single remedy can be prescribed, but two things are certain:

First, there are individual children whose abnormal behavior should be detected early, recognized frankly, and treated before they become a menace. Second, at certain ages it is natural to form gangs. All boys and girls need group activities, and if wholesome ones are not provided, they will form destructive gangs that bring out the worst in their members.

But take courage! Millions of parents eventually get responsible behavior from their children where only a few fail.

**O**UR KNOWLEDGE of the child mind has increased enormously in recent years. We know that trying to suppress aggressive impulses does not remove them, and that a child will show his repressions and frustrations if he does not have an outlet for them.

Some parents put undue emphasis on this truth, and think that nothing should be suppressed. What we must do is find a balance between the extreme permissiveness which tolerates objectionable behavior as "just a phase they all go through" and the anxious concern which inflicts extreme punishment for any breach.

Punishment is a two-edged weapon. It does no good to bite the baby back. We teach by example, not by meeting the child with reprisal on his own immature level of action. A child who is too indignantly and constantly punished may feel so hopeless that he will give up trying, figuring, in effect, "I have the name, I might as well have the game."

Albert, 12, put this feeling tellingly: "I can't win. If I hit a littler kid, I'm a bully. If I let him get away with hitting me, I'm a sissy. So I'd rather be a bully."

Punishment does not help a child in such a quandary. Depriving him of a treat, or part of his allowance, does not develop his kindly nature. All of us have a lifelong need to be accepted and respected. When a child must be corrected, we must use a way that will help him save face. The words, "I understand how you feel," are magically effective as a preface to any reproof.

If we never lose sight of the fact that a child nearly always acts destructively, overaggressively, or cruelly not to *make* trouble, but because he already is in trouble, the battle is won.