



DANISH FAMILY THERAPIST AND EDUCATOR *Jesper Juul* COUNSELS A FAMILY ABOUT THEIR TWO-YEAR-OLD SON'S AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AT HIS CHILDCARE CENTRE

**N**ick is two and full of energy. Considering his age he is big and strong. Now he's in trouble at childcare. His parents, Sarah and Robert, were told that Nick is violent because he snatches toys and uses his force to get what he wants. Some mornings when they arrive, other parents look at them with despair knowing that Nick might hit their child later that day. What can Nick's parents do so he does not become "the horror kid"? Can they teach him to play safely?

### THE COACHING SESSION

**JESPER** How can I help you?

**SARAH** Nick's carers told us they constantly have to keep an eye on him because he is so rough with the other children. They wanted to know if he watches violent TV shows at home. But he doesn't – he can't even sit still for two minutes. At home, Rob does play roughly with him though. They love to wrestle. I am worried that Nick will turn into one of those really horrible, violent kids.

**JESPER** To me, this all sounds completely normal. Considering Nick's size, it is easy for him to move someone out of the way and take what he wants. The fact that Robert wrestles with him is fantastic. Not only does it help Nick develop his fine motor skills, it also makes him happy. Interestingly, some boys who become rough later in life haven't had that opportunity.

**ROBERT** There aren't any male carers at childcare.

**JESPER** This is a general problem. On top of that, many childcare centres are very "anti-aggression" these days. You can safely deduct half of what they tell you about Nick. What they say might tell you more about their own opinion of boys rather than the actual boy.

**SARAH** We have discussed things and agree that Rob should stop playing roughly with him. We

want to take his plastic sword and those types of toys away too.

**JESPER** You certainly shouldn't do that. I would rather suggest that Robert wrestles even more with him. I wouldn't actually worry about Nick. I might worry about the way his carers react to his behaviour. But that is a different issue. Carers tend to forget that children don't integrate the concept of "right and wrong" until the age of four simply because their brains aren't ready for it.

If you look at an opposite to Nick, a little child who is quiet, doesn't muck up and lives alone with his mum, when he enters a group he knows how to be small, move around and find his spot. Your boy is the opposite. When you talk about Nick, I sense that he is very expressive. He might simply be one of those children who others will have to

relate to. They can't walk around him and will have to work out if they like him or think he is too much. But there is nothing in what you have told me that indicates there is something wrong with him. Sometimes kids become aggressive and a bit too violent at childcare or in kindergarten because they are not happy with their lives. But it doesn't sound like that is the case with Nick.

**SARAH** He does hit other children sometimes! Friends of ours have a lovely little boy, Finn. Nick sometimes pushes him over and snatches his toys. Obviously I get up to comfort Finn and tell Nick that it was wrong. Meanwhile Finn's father gets angry: "What's going on?! Is Nick hurting Finn again?" As if Nick does it to be malicious. What can we do in these situations?

**JESPER** You need to remember that Nick does what he does and that he is equipped with a generous amount of self-confidence. You can choose to react to everything he does, monitor his every move and comment on everything he does wrong. However, if you do that you must realise that it will take a long time before his behaviour will change. Ironically, the more reasons you give him, the longer it will take. It is obviously important that other people are able to stop Nick from hurting their children. But if they can't do it without criticising him or putting him down then you might need to raise the issue with them.

Let me make this very clear: children do not learn from their experiences when they are being criticised at the same time. It is as simple as that! Look at it this way: when kids fall over and get

*Children do not learn from their experiences when they are being criticised at the same time...*

hurt, we can tell them to be more careful. But it will make little difference. If we don't criticise them, they will learn to be more cautious much sooner. You might need to speak with his carers. Say, 'It is OK that you tell Nick he is not allowed to hit but don't turn this into a huge issue.'

It will take time because Nick has so much energy that his memory will fail him. He will forget, which will inevitably clash with the culture of the institution. He hasn't worked out how to walk around people who stand in his way. Not yet!

**SARAH** Last week he was about to run into a little girl at childcare. I got there in time to stop him. He doesn't understand that something bad could happen if he runs into someone.

**JESPER** Of course not. How would he know that?





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**SARAH** I can understand that other parents get upset when they see a big boy run over their kids.

**JESPER** Sure! Parents do become rather primitive when it comes to their own children. That's the way it is. In the old days, well, it actually still happens today, some adults do to their children what they have just done to others in an effort to teach them. Say the child hits someone. Some parents think that if they hit the child he will know what it is like. They say, 'Now you know how much that hurts!'

For heaven's sake! You can't tell someone it is wrong to hit by hitting them. Sure, the child might stop doing it – but only out of fear. Honestly, what are you supposed to do when you are a little person and totally frustrated? You are not able to speak as fast as you think. What can you do? You bite or kick or punch or throw something.

This is exactly why it is so important that Robert wrestles with him. Nick will soon learn that he can't fight with others the way he does with Robert. Through wrestling Nick will learn to monitor his power and understand his limitations. Just don't let him win every time. He must also learn to lose properly.

**SARAH** It is a relief to hear that we don't have to restrict him too much.

**JESPER** Remember, when you are two years old, you have to practise lots of things and it takes time to learn – a lot longer than the two months most parents would like. If children are criticised while they are meant to be learning they will learn absolutely nothing. Their brains simply come to a standstill when they are criticised. Researchers have finally been able to document that.

#### THE RESULT

**SARAH** After our conversation with Jesper things really have calmed down. It gave us a great sense of comfort talking with him about Nick's situation – very different to the old wives' tales and fixed solutions we were used to. We are now fully prepared to explain to people that they are welcome to stop Nick from being violent but we will not accept that they get angry with him. Rob still plays rough with him. I think it is a bit too wild but I must acknowledge that they both enjoy it and Nick is getting better at understanding his limits. ●

Text by Pernille Lauritsen and translated to English by Hayes van der Meer from Family-Lab Australia. Names have been changed for privacy reasons. For more information visit [familylab.com.au](http://familylab.com.au).