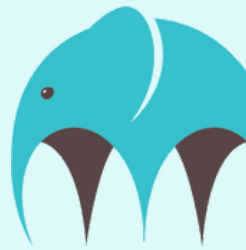


# Aggression Toward Family and Caregivers in Childhood and Adolescence (AFCCA): Managing Aggression at Home



We partnered with [Interwoven Connections](#) and their network of clinicians and families with lived expertise to develop this resource to provide support and validation to families who are experiencing aggression in their homes. This resource will guide families toward strategies and resources to support parents and caregivers, the child or youth exhibiting aggressive behaviours, and siblings or other family members in the home who may be impacted.

## What's in this resource?

- What is AFCCA?
- Why does AFCCA happen?
- How does AFCCA affect families?
- How can I prepare for incidents of AFCCA?
- How can I support my family in the moment?
- What if I need to visit the hospital?
- What should I do after an incident of AFCCA?
- Where can I get help for AFCCA?



## What is Aggression Toward Families and Caregivers in Childhood and Adolescence (AFCCA)?

Aggression in children and youth is a concerning issue. A particular type of aggressive behaviour during these years is “Aggression toward Family or Caregivers in Childhood and Adolescence” or [AFCCA](#). This is a pattern of behaviour where a child or young person engages in aggressive acts aimed at family members or caregivers. This can cause significant physical and/or psychological harm to the child or young person, the family member or caregiver toward whom the behaviour is directed, as well as other family members.

## What does AFCCA look like?

AFCCA is most often directed toward primary parents or caregivers or siblings in the home, but it can also happen with caregivers in other settings. This behaviour can become entrenched and escalate over time. Some common ways AFCCA presents itself either in the home or out in the community include patterns where a child or young person is:

- **Expressing angry or aggressive outbursts towards others.** These seem unprovoked and can sometimes last for an extended period. It can also be difficult to calm the child or young person during and after the incident.
- **Using aggressive language or posturing.** This can include making threats of harm to family members and/or other caregivers or threatening to hurt themselves.
- **Physically injuring others or themselves.** This can include pushing, shoving, spitting, tripping, hitting, kicking or throwing things, or engaging in acts of self-harm.
- **Psychologically or emotionally injuring others or themselves.** This includes saying hurtful things, making unfounded accusations, swearing, etc.
- **Engaging in dangerous or risky behaviours either in or outside of the home.** This can include setting fires, destroying property, stealing, running into or toward traffic, using illegal drugs, using weapons, etc.

It's difficult to understand these kinds of aggressive incidents when they present in children and youth. Some describe it like a [tornado](#) that arises when certain factors are in place, like trauma, neurodevelopmental disorders, a history of exposure to violent behaviour, etc. Parents and caregivers report feeling shame, stigma and isolation when they experience AFCCA, making it really hard for them to talk about, which in turn makes it hard to ask for support. When these behaviours occur regularly, persist, result in injury or harm to others, and/or seem to be getting worse with time, it's important to [seek help](#). We'll talk more about how throughout this resource.

**PARENT**  
to **PARENT**

*"I was very isolated and (had) a real sense of shame. A lot of the narrative in the world is that if you have a problem, you find the right help and it is resolved, especially with mental illness. It was such a shame, really. I got more and more isolated...."*

## Why does AFCCA happen?

We all have emotions which help us to express our thoughts and feelings, and communicate these to people around us. Sometimes these emotions can cause harm if we don't manage them well. "[Emotional self-regulation](#)" is present when a person is able to manage their emotional reactions effectively. In other words, it's our ability to handle our feelings and respond appropriately to the demands of a situation. This is something that most children and adults practice and learn to do well over time.

Have you ever found that if you're around someone who's really stressed, you also start to feel stressed? This is because our stress can cause others to become stressed and vice versa. The good news is that our calm can help others to become calm as well. This process is called [co-regulation](#), and it happens when adults and children or youth help each other to manage their emotions together. When co-regulation is successful, a parent or caregiver who presents empathy and peacefulness can help the child or youth to decrease stress they may be experiencing and increase calm.



AFCCA happens when there's a [breakdown in the process of co-regulation](#) between a child or youth and the adults around them. Aggression can occur when the child or young person struggles to manage their emotions and they direct their frustration to parents or caregivers, siblings in the home or other adults in a caregiver role. Over time, this behaviour can evolve into a habit and become more intense.

There are several things that can make this worse or more extreme for a child or youth, like challenges or gaps in communication skills, day-to-day stressors or life experiences. Whatever the cause, however, the struggle to co-regulate with adults can result in progressive challenges with self-regulation for the child or youth exhibiting AFCCA. This dynamic can deepen the issues faced in the family over time, making them harder to deal with.

## How does AFCCA affect families?

As a parent or caregiver, you're doing your best to support the child(ren) or youth in your home. It can feel very scary and "out of control" when you experience AFCCA in your family environment. The level of instability and disruption in the family can be alarming and can have significant impacts.

## What are the impacts of AFCCA?

### For the child or young person exhibiting AFCCA:

- Feelings of guilt, shame, and blame
- Worsening or escalating mental health challenges
- A lack of confidence and diminished sense of self-worth
- Damaged family relationships and connections
- Potential criminalization and being seen as a violent perpetrator
- Becoming involved in (or re-entering) the child welfare system
- Risk of having this behaviour be more and more entrenched over time

### For parents, caregivers, and other family members:

- Significant risk of psychological and/or physical harm
- Worsening mental health challenges
- Secondary trauma from exposure to violence
- Judgement, exclusion and isolation from other family members and broader community
- Increased risk of marriage breakdown
- Instability in employment, which can have financial effects that can strain the family further
- [Challenges and trauma in siblings](#)

[The impact of AFCCA can be far reaching](#), and can include extended family members, pets or animals in the house, peers and friends, and/or neighbours who may witness aggressive events. The [role of culture and cultural expectations of parenting](#) present unique challenges for those from racially or ethnically diverse families, which need to be taken into consideration when supporting the range of families in our communities.

**PARENT**  
*to* **PARENT**

*“We were desperate... it was spiralling out of control and we didn’t know where it was going to go. Was it going to be screaming? A disruption that the police would have to come? Was one of the kids going to hurt the other kid or parents?”*

## How can I prepare for incidents of AFCCA?

When the child or young person in your life is behaving aggressively towards you and/or others in the home, everyone is at risk of physical and/or psychological harm. When things are calm, it may be valuable to think through how to prepare for the next incident that might occur.

## Some strategies to help you prepare:

- **Practice managing stress.** [Learn about your own stress response](#) and plan strategies that you can use to help you remain as calm as possible in the moment. This can help to support co-regulation, which we discussed above.
- **Build up your support network.** It's important to engage with [extended family members, friends, neighbours, and members of different community groups](#) to which you might be connected, etc. in conversations about AFCCA. Let them know (to the extent that you're comfortable) what's going on and how you might call on them in a time of need. Be sure to include your child or young person in these discussions so that your [support network](#) is comprised of people that everyone is comfortable with.
- **Create a “code word.”** Work with siblings or other family members to establish a “code word” that can be used when they're feeling unsafe.
- **Show unconditional love and care for your child or youth.** [“Relational gestures”](#) are small, spontaneous acts that focus on positive elements of your relationship with your child or young person. Since children and youth who display AFCCA behaviour tend to have negative perceptions of themselves and their families, these behaviours can help strengthen the connection with your child or youth and shift their perception to a more positive one.

## Develop a Family Safety Plan

A [Family Safety Plan](#) works to keep everyone in your home environment safe. Developing this plan when things are calm helps you think through how you might prepare in a crisis situation. It can help you to consider ways of coping in the moment, warning signs, ways to make the environment safe, thinking through responses to various situations, etc.

It can be put into effect if your child or teen becomes verbally or physically aggressive to people in the home and/or pets; shows self-harm or threatens suicide, leaves the house abruptly when angry, or has issues with fire or the destruction of property.

A sample safety plan can be developed with your child or teen, other family members, and support people (doctor, mental health professional).

## How can I support my family in the moment?

1

### Slow down and use fewer words.

Your child or youth isn't in a state where they can listen when they're in crisis. Pause, observe what is happening, and remember that your child or youth is not able to process much of what you are saying right now. Too many words can increase escalation in the moment, so it is best to speak slowly and use fewer words so that they can process what you are saying.

2

### De-escalate.

In aggressive moments, it's important to remember that making threats, warning about consequences, or saying things like "you always do this" or "you need to stop this" is likely to be unproductive. Offer clear choices and limitations to the child or young person, as this can help them feel a sense of control. If it's your partner who is on the receiving end of aggression in your home, [work to support them](#).

3

### Implement the Family Safety Plan.

Make sure the Family Safety Plan is in an accessible place, and that all family members know how to find it. In the moment when an incident becomes likely to escalate to aggression, remove those who may be the target of AFCCA or who might be feeling unsafe. If your child or young person threatens to damage or destroy property, or hurt or kill themselves or someone else, it's important to get help as quickly as possible.

## Know when to call 911

Within the Family Safety Plan, ensure that all family members know to call 911 for emergency help when there is a risk of violence, suicidal behaviour (intent or immediate risk), self-harm (intent or immediate risk), or unusual behaviour that appears dangerous.

## Know alternatives to 911

For cultural reasons, some families may not feel comfortable or safe calling 911 or interacting with the police. In these cases, it is important to remember that there are alternatives. Communities across the province have local crisis lines or non-police-led mobile crisis teams that can help support in instances of AFCCA. Learn about what resources might be available close to you.

## What if I need to visit the hospital?

If your child is suicidal or threatening self-harm, you may need to visit the hospital's emergency department. Knowing what to expect can make this really difficult situation a bit more manageable. Depending on the hospital you visit, the process could include:

- **Being “triaged,”** which means the hospital will assess the situation, assign a level of urgency and determine when and by whom they'll be seen. We recommend downloading our [Emergency Personal Information Sheet](#) and filling it out ahead of time so that you can use it to support your experience at the hospital.
- **Moving your child or teen to a “safe room”** to keep everyone secure and protected from harm. If the police accompanied you and your child or youth to the hospital, they'll stay with your teen until they're seen.
- **Being seen by a member of the hospital's mental health team.** This person could be a psychiatrist, a psychologist and/or a social worker. They'll talk with and assess your child or young person, which could take a considerable amount of time since they may need to speak with your child or young person's current mental health provider, if they have one. They will also likely ask you and other family members to provide background and contextual information.
- Once they've assessed your child or youth, the mental health team may decide to **either admit your child or teen to hospital or discharge them with advice on next steps.** You may want to think through a list of questions so that you understand the path ahead.



**Download our Emergency  
Personal Information Sheet**



See the [Mental Health Act](#) for guidance on what forms you may need to complete in this situation.

## What should I do after an incident of AFCCA?

After an episode of aggression, there may be a period of calm when you can reflect on what worked well and what didn't work so well. Think about what changes you might want or need to make to the [Family Safety Plan](#). **You should also prioritize taking restorative time, since these incidents are draining and exhausting, and recovery time is essential.**

A very real concern for parents and caregivers after an incident of AFCCA is “how can I make sure this doesn't happen again”? While it's not always possible to prevent future instances of aggression, you might be able to put some practices in place to help reduce the impact or severity of these.

For example, creating a structured, secure environment and addressing small problems before they become big ones can be effective in lessening AFCCA. As well, you may develop a sense of what situations or stressors provoke aggression in your child or young person. Clearly identifying these and trying to remove or reduce them may lessen the impact of these incidents.

Finally, talk with your child or youth and encourage them to share how these incidents impact them, what you might do together to prevent them next time, etc.

## Where can I get help for AFCCA?

We've talked a lot about the shame and stigma that surrounds AFCCA. This can make it difficult to seek out support. However, by getting help for your child or youth and your family, you can keep your home environment safe, improve communication and strengthen relationships between members. There are a range of supports available locally, including:

- Local mobile crisis teams
- [Community-based child and youth mental health providers](#) across Ontario
- [AFCCA supports](#) (specifically for adoptive or kinship families in Ontario)
- Local police services

**PARENT**  
to **PARENT**

*“I didn't know that being assaulted or... injured by your child was a common occurrence. I was very alone. I didn't know that we were the only ones going through it. I didn't know where to go. I thought I was doing something wrong as a parent.”*

## How can I take care of myself?

As parents and caregivers, you put a lot of energy into taking care of your family. You deserve empathy, care, and support to take care of yourself. Here are a few things you can try:

- **Draw on peer support.** Visit [Parents for Children's Mental Health](#) and [Family Connections](#) (a program led by peers that teaches skills for families with loved ones who have emotional dysregulation or related problems). If your family is connected through adoption or kinship, you can also connect with peer support at [Interwoven Connections](#). Time with people who have been there can help you to feel less alone.
- **Build your community of support.** Friends, extended family and others in your community can be very valuable in helping you through difficult times and celebrating when things are going well.
- **Practice restorative time.** Do things that make you happy outside of the home. This can help broaden your perspective and offer some creative outlets that can decrease stress.
- **Don't take it personally.** Being the parent or caregiver of a child or young person who struggles with AFCCA can take its toll. Understanding the reasons behind our child or young person's actions, such as trauma or neurodiversity, can help us make sense of their actions and not take them personally. Learn more about this by checking out [this tip sheet](#).

**PARENT**  
to **PARENT**

*"When I consider where we were at, there have been so many changes. I think we are better able to talk to people who can provide support to us and let them know what is going on. We aren't alone."*

## How do I know if my family is connected to a service provider or clinician that is AFCCA informed?

Sometimes, you will be seeking supports from providers or clinicians who don't fully understand the experience of living with AFCCA. As a parent or caregiver, you may already find yourself experiencing feelings of guilt or shame. Guilt and shame are very typical feelings that are experienced by ALL family members experiencing AFCCA, so it's important to find a mental health care team that understands AFCCA and can validate your experience as a family member. Here is what to look for in a clinician or service provider:

- **They are curious.** Their approach includes seeking your expertise in ways that may sound like “How is this impacting you?” or “What have you already tried?” or “Tell me about what has worked in the past.”
- **You feel seen and heard.** You leave your interactions feeling like they understand what you are going through and you are invited in as a voice in this experience.
- **Your expertise is valued.** You know your child or youth best, and you feel that this knowledge is recognized and considered heavily when decisions are being made about services or actions. You feel like you are part of a collaborative team supporting your child or youth, rather than someone being directed on how to parent differently.



You could help your child or youth’s mental health care team learn more about AFCCA by sharing this resource. Learn more about how to navigate your feelings of guilt and shame by watching this video from the [AFCCA Caregiver Training Series](#).

## You don’t have to do this alone.

If you are a parent or caregiver worried about your child, or a young person looking for help yourself, please use our Find Help tool to connect with a service provider near you. Our network of child and youth mental health centres has 4,000 professionals ready to help children, youth, and families with free counselling and treatment. Our agencies provide care in person, on the phone, and virtually. No problem is too big or small.

[Find your closest child and youth mental health centre.](#)