

Behavior or Conduct Problems in Children



Points To Remember:

- Always seek immediate help if a child engages in unsafe behavior or talks about wanting to hurt him or herself or someone else.
- Seek help when a child's behavior or emotional difficulties last for more than a few weeks and are causing problems at school, at home, or with friends.
- A thorough evaluation can help determine if treatment is necessary, and which treatments may be most effective.
- Early treatment can help address a child's current difficulties and can also help prevent more serious problems in the future

Externalizing Disorders

Children sometimes argue, are aggressive, or act angry or defiant around adults. A behavior disorder may be diagnosed when these disruptive behaviors are uncommon for the child's age at the time, persist over time, or are severe. Because disruptive behavior disorders involve acting out and showing unwanted behavior towards others they are often called externalizing disorders.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

When children act out persistently so that it causes serious problems at home, in school, or with peers, they may be diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). ODD usually starts before 8 years of age, but no later than by about 12 years of age. Children with ODD are more likely to act oppositional or defiant around people they know well, such as family members, a regular care provider, or a teacher. Children with ODD show these behaviors more often than other children their age.

Examples of ODD behaviors include:

- Often being angry or losing one's temper
- Often arguing with adults or refusing to comply with adults' rules or requests
- Often resentful or spiteful
- Deliberately annoying others or becoming annoyed with others
- Often blaming other people for one's own mistakes or misbehavior

Conduct Disorder (CD)

Conduct Disorder is diagnosed when children show an ongoing pattern of aggression toward others, and serious violations of rules and social norms at home, in school, and with peers. These rule violations may involve breaking the law and result in arrest. Children with CD are more likely to get injured and may have difficulties getting along with peers. Examples of CD behaviors include:

- Breaking serious rules, such as running away, staying out at night when told not to, or skipping school
- Being aggressive in a way that causes harm, such as bullying, fighting, or being cruel to animals
- Lying, stealing, or damaging other people's property on purpose



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Risk Factors

It is not known exactly why some children develop disruptive behavior disorders. Many factors may play a role, including biological and social factors. It is known that children are at greater risk when they are exposed to other types of violence and criminal behavior, when they experience maltreatment or harsh or inconsistent parenting, or when their parents have mental health conditions like substance use disorders, depression, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The quality of early childhood care also can impact whether a child develops behavior problems.

Treatment for Disruptive Behavior Disorders

Starting treatment early is important. Treatment is most effective if it fits the needs of the specific child and family. The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider. A comprehensive evaluation by a mental health professional may be needed to get the right diagnosis. Some of the signs of behavior problems, such as the child not following rules in school, could be related to learning problems which may need additional intervention.

For younger children, the treatment with the strongest evidence is behavior therapy training for parents, where a therapist helps the parent learn effective ways to strengthen the parent-child relationship and respond to the child's behavior. For school-age children and teens, an often-used effective treatment is a combination of training and therapy that includes the family, and the school.

Managing Symptoms: Staying Healthy

Being healthy is important for all children and can be especially important for children with behavior or conduct problems. In addition to behavioral therapy and medication, practicing certain healthy lifestyle behaviors may reduce challenging and disruptive behaviors your child might experience. Here are some healthy behaviors that may help:

- Engaging in regular physical activity, including aerobic and vigorous exercise
- Eating a healthful diet centered on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (for example, beans, peas, and lentils), lean protein sources, and nuts and seeds
- Getting the recommended amount of sleep each night based on age
- Strengthening relationships with family members

Connecticut Resources

United Way 211
www.211ct.org/

National Resources

www.MentalHealth.gov

National Institute on
Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline
1-800-273-8255

