

## Facts

Conduct disorders are a type of disruptive behavior problem. People with conduct disorder display a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. Disruptive behavior disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder, put children at risk for long-term problems including mental disorders, violence, and delinquency. Getting the right treatment early is key.

The disorder may begin as early as the preschool years, but the first significant symptoms usually emerge during the period from middle childhood through middle adolescence.

The incidence of conduct disorder estimates range from 2% to more than 10%. Rates rise from childhood to adolescence and are higher among males than females. Few children with impairing conduct disorder get treatment.

## Signs & Symptoms

- Aggression to people and animals
- Destruction of property
- Deceitfulness or theft
- Serious violation of rules

## Causes

Twin and adoption studies indicate that conduct disorder has both genetic and environmental factors. The risk for conduct disorder is increased in children who have a biological or adoptive parent with Antisocial Personality Disorder, or a sibling with Conduct Disorder. It is also more common if a parent has alcohol dependence, mood disorders, schizophrenia, or a history of Conduct Disorder or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. A chaotic home life, parenting problems, alcoholism, or drug abuse in the home; socioeconomic deprivation which encourages stealing to get what is wanted; and developmental factors leading to high anger and low frustration tolerance are all environmental factors related to conduct disorder.

## Treatment

Parent behavior therapy has the strongest evidence as an effective treatment for disruptive behavior problems in children to learn special behavioral techniques that can be implemented at home. Treatment approaches with the highest rating for effectiveness are group parent behavior therapy and individual parent behavior therapy with child participation. Child Parent Psychotherapy is one evidence based approach that has been proven effective. Other approaches like client-centered therapy or play therapy did not have enough studies or strong enough evidence of effectiveness to receive a high rating. More studies are needed to determine whether these approaches are effective for treating children's disruptive behavior problems.

## Helping Yourself

Finding ways to relax which work for you can be a key strategy in helping yourself. Here are a few things you can try:

- **Monitor your outlook.** Remember that the specific thing that triggers your anger isn't the only thing which causes angry feelings. When you get angry, ask yourself: Am I overreacting to this trigger? Am I directing my anger at an innocent person? Am I taking this personally? Am I just reacting the way I usually respond? Am I trying to take charge of my anger?
- **Breathing.** Consciously take several deep breaths, concentrating on each breath.
- **Relaxation** by body parts. Close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and consciously relax yourself, one body part at a time, beginning at your toes and working up until you have relaxed your entire body, including head and face. An alternative is to tense each body part for 15-20 seconds before relaxing it.
- **Imagine** a pleasant peaceful scene or favorite place. Concentrate on the details, colors, smells and sounds.
- **Massage.** Self-massage of face, neck and head is easy to do and is an instant stress reducer.
- Find a way to **express your feelings.** It may be to

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join a support group, start a diary or journal, or talk things over with a friend.

- **Exercise** is known to increase the body's morphine-like endorphins, while improving the brain's oxygen supply and releasing tension from the muscles.
- **Have a sense of humor.** Try to find the humor in minor troubles and annoyances.
- **Meditation**, yoga, listening to soothing music all are proven stress-reducing activities, as well as hot baths, warm showers, steam baths and saunas.
- **Try a hobby.** A hobby can be a productive outlet for tension and energy and a welcome distraction from angry feelings.

### Helping Someone Else

Children with disruptive behavior disorders often benefit from special behavioral techniques that can be implemented at home and at school. These approaches typically include methods for training your child to become more aware of his own anger cues, use these cues as signals to initiate various coping strategies ("Take five deep breaths and think about the three best choices for how to respond before lashing out at a teacher."), and provide himself with positive reinforcement (telling himself, "Good job, you caught the signal and used your strategies!") for successful self-control.

You and your child's teachers, meanwhile, can learn to better manage behavior through negotiating, compromising, problem-solving with your child, anticipating and avoiding potentially explosive situations, and prioritizing goals so that less important problems are ignored until more pressing issues have been successfully addressed. These highly specific techniques can be taught by professional behavior therapists or other mental health professionals recommended by your child's pediatrician or school psychologist, or other professionals involved with your family.

Family therapy can be helpful in increasing education and understanding among family members of a person with this disorder. Parents may also want to seek treatment focusing on behavioral management, communication, problem-solving, realistic expectations, etc. In addition, many parents have benefited from participating in a community support group.

If you are the parent or caregiver of a person with conduct disorder, it is important to take care of yourself and stay connected with your own support system, i.e., maintain and increase your network of friends, keep in regular contact with several trusted

people, participate in new activities.

In dealing with the day-to-day behaviors of the person, don't answer anger with anger. It's important to try to understand why the person is angry by listening, maintaining eye contact, and not interrupting. Sometimes the person just needs to "vent," and the anger doesn't involve you personally. If you're trying to solve a conflict, wait until the person is calm and try talking through possible solutions together that you can both agree on. If a person is very angry and has a weapon, don't confront or try to restrain them. If you're worried about your safety, get away and get help.

- Always build on the positive, give the child praise and positive reinforcement when he shows flexibility or cooperation.
- Take a time-out or break if you are about to make the conflict with your child worse. This is good modeling for your child. Support your child if he decides to take a time-out to prevent overreacting.
- Pick your battles. Prioritize the things you want your child to do. If you give your child a time-out in his room for misbehavior, don't add time for arguing. Say "your time will start when you go to your room."
- Set up reasonable, age appropriate limits with consequences that can be enforced consistently.

#### Sources:

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition*  
National Institute of Mental Health  
American Psychiatric Association  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

### For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health Authority  
1-800-337-8598  
(231) 922-4850

National Alliance on Mental Illness  
www.nami.org  
(800) 950-6264

Mental Health America  
www.nmha.org  
(800) 969-6642

The Center for Mental Health Services  
www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/