



Conduct Disorder

No. 33; Updated June 2018

"Conduct disorder" refers to a group of repetitive and persistent behavioral and emotional problems in youngsters. Children and adolescents with this disorder have great difficulty following rules, respecting the rights of others, showing empathy, and behaving in a socially acceptable way. They are often viewed by other children, adults and social agencies as "bad" or delinquent, rather than mentally ill. Many factors may lead to a child developing conduct disorder, including brain damage, **child abuse** or neglect, genetic vulnerability, school failure, and **traumatic life experiences**.

Children or adolescents with conduct disorder may exhibit some of the following behaviors:

Aggression to people and animals

- **bullies, threatens** or intimidates others
- delights in being cruel and mean to others
- starts **physical fights**
- has used a weapon that could cause serious physical harm to others (e.g. a bat, brick, broken bottle, knife or **gun**)
- is **physically cruel to people or animals**
- **steals** from a victim while hurting them
- forces someone into sexual activity
- shows no genuine remorse after an aggressive episode

Destruction of Property

- **deliberately engaged in fire setting with the intention to cause damage**
- deliberately destroys other's property

Deceitfulness, lying, or stealing

- has broken into someone else's building, house, or car
- **lies** to obtain goods, or favors or to avoid obligations
- **steals** items without confronting a victim (e.g. shoplifting, but without breaking and entering)

Serious violations of rules

- often stays out at night despite parental objections
- runs away from home
- often stays away from

Children who exhibit these behaviors should receive a **comprehensive evaluation** by an experienced mental health professional. Many children with a conduct disorder may have coexisting conditions such as **mood disorders, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, ADHD, learning problems**, or thought disorders which

can also be treated. Research shows that youngsters with conduct disorder are likely to have ongoing problems if they and their families do not receive **early and comprehensive treatment**. Without treatment, many youngsters with conduct disorder are unable to adapt to the demands of adulthood and continue to have problems with relationships and holding a job.

Treatment of children with conduct disorder can be complex and challenging. Treatment can be provided in a variety of different settings depending on the severity of the behaviors. Adding to the challenge of treatment are the child's uncooperative attitude, fear and distrust of adults. In developing a comprehensive treatment plan, a **child and adolescent psychiatrist** may use information from the child, family, teachers, community (including the legal system) and other medical specialties to understand the causes of the disorder.

Behavior therapy and psychotherapy are usually necessary to help the child appropriately express and control anger. **Special education** may be needed for youngsters with **learning disabilities**. Parents often need expert help to develop and carry out special management and educational programs in the home and at school. Home-based treatment programs such as Multisystemic Therapy (MST) are effective for helping both the child and family.

Treatment may also include **medication** in some youngsters who may have **difficulty paying attention**, impulse problems, or **depression**.

Treatment is rarely brief since establishing new attitudes and behavior patterns takes time. However, early treatment offers a child a better chance for considerable improvement and hope for a more successful future.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

If you find **Facts for Families**© helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality, consider donating to the **Campaign for America's Kids**. Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute *Facts for Families*, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to **Campaign for America's Kids**, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 9,400 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families© information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by AACAP. Hard copies of *Facts* sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All *Facts* can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). *Facts* sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to

AACAP's website and specific *Facts* sheets. For all questions please contact the AACAP Communications Manager, ext. 154.

If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

Copyright © 2021 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.