

# Conduct Disorder

Children with conduct disorder behave in various unacceptable ways—from lying and fighting to violent criminal offenses. Conduct disorder can obviously cause a lot of trouble for your child and family. It may also be linked to other problems, such as learning disabilities and drug and alcohol abuse. Evaluation and treatment can help to reduce your child's conduct problems.

## What is conduct disorder?

Conduct disorder is a term used to describe the problems of children and teens with repeated, serious forms of antisocial behavior. Although all children break rules now and then, children with conduct disorder repeatedly get into trouble for things like stealing, lying, damaging property, and assaulting other people. Conduct disorder may occur in association with other problems, such as attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or bipolar disorder.

Over time, especially in the teen years, children with conduct disorder may commit more serious offenses and get into legal trouble. If your child has this type of problem, it's important to get him or her evaluation and treatment. Especially with treatment, most children with conduct disorder grow up to be responsible adults.

## What does it look like?

Children with conduct disorder may act in many different unacceptable, antisocial ways:

- They break rules and get into trouble at school and at home. Your child or teen may skip school, stay out at night, or run away.
- Your child may act aggressively, including bullying and fighting with others. He or she may shoplift, set fires, or harm animals.
- Children and adolescents with conduct disorder may commit serious criminal offenses.
- Your child may have additional psychological problems, including depressed or anxious mood, inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity, or drug and alcohol abuse.

## What causes conduct disorder?

Many factors may be involved, including genetics, medical problems, and family difficulties.

## What are some possible complications of conduct disorder?

- Behavior and discipline problems can make your child's home, school, and social life very difficult.
- The more serious offenses committed by children and teens with conduct disorder can obviously lead to severe legal consequences.
- Some youngsters with conduct disorder continue to have social and behavioral problems as adults.

## How is conduct disorder treated?

If your child has a history of repeated aggressive, destructive behavior, we may recommend evaluation by a mental health professional.

The goal of psychological evaluation is not to "label" or stigmatize your child. Rather it's to understand the factors contributing to your child's behavior problems and to find the best way of addressing them.

- *Psychotherapy* may be helpful. Psychotherapy works through helping your child to understand the reasons why he or she acts in certain ways through building a trusting relationship with the therapist. However, for children with conduct disorder, it may be difficult to develop a trusting relationship with a therapist.
- *Group therapy* is sometimes more useful for adolescents with conduct disorder because they are more likely to respond to other teens with similar problems than to a therapist. For younger children with conduct disorder, anger management techniques may help.
- Some important techniques for treatment of conduct disorder are:
  - *Parent management training*. This form of therapy seeks to teach parents how to interact with their child in ways that will help to avoid unacceptable behaviors.
  - *Cognitive-behavioral therapy*. This form of therapy focuses on problem-solving skills. The goal is to help your child to be aware of the causes and consequences of problems and to focus on developing new ways of dealing with situations.
  - *School interventions*. Your child's school may also be involved in the management of conduct disorder. Comprehensive approaches involving all aspects of your child's life may be more likely to succeed. If your child has a learning disability, special education may be needed.

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- *Medications* may be part of your child's treatment but should not be the only treatment. Medications have little effect on aggressive or hostile behavior problems, but they may help in managing other problems sometimes associated with conduct disorder, for example, attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder or depression.

Treatment for conduct disorder is a long-term process. Your doctor can help to put you in touch with mental health

professionals and services that can help to understand and reduce your child's behavior problems.



### **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if your child develops a pattern of antisocial or destructive behavior.