



UNDERSTANDING CONDUCT DISORDER

The term “Conduct Disorder” refers to a group of behavioral and emotional problems in children. Conduct Disorder is known as a “disruptive behavior disorder,” because of its impact on children and their families, neighbors, and schools. Children and adolescents with this disorder have great difficulty following the rules of society. They are often viewed as “bad” or delinquent, while in fact they have a diagnosable mental illness.

Conduct disorder affects 1 to 4 percent of 9 to 17 year-olds, depending on how the disorder is defined. The disorder appears to be more common in boys than in girls and more common in cities than in rural areas.

Symptoms

The following behaviors are signs of Conduct Disorder:

- aggression to people and animals (bullying, threatening, physical fights, use of weapons, physical cruelty, assault, forced sexual activity)
- destruction of property (intentional fire setting, deliberate destruction of property)
- deceitfulness, lying, or stealing (breaking into someone’s house/car, lying to obtain goods/favors or to avoid obligations, theft)
- serious violation of rules (ignoring family curfews, running away from home, skipping school, early tobacco/alcohol/drug use, early sexual activity)



Children with Conduct Disorder may also experience:

- higher rates of depression, and suicidal thoughts/attempts
- difficulties in school
- sexually transmitted diseases
- higher-than-average rates of injuries and legal problems

Risk Factors

Some cases of conduct disorder begin as early as the preschool years. Some infants who are especially “fussy” may be at risk for developing Conduct Disorder. Other risk factors include:

- early rejection by mother figure
- early separation from parents, without adequate alternative caregiver
- early institutionalization
- abuse or violence
- family neglect, parental mental illness, parental marital discord
- large family size, crowding, poverty

My Child Fits This Description—What Can I Do?

Children who exhibit these behaviors should receive a comprehensive evaluation. There may be a coexisting condition such as a mood disorder, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, ADHD, or learning disorders. Research shows that children with Conduct Disorder are likely to have ongoing problems unless the family seeks early, comprehensive treatment. Without treatment, problems can occur in adulthood—it can be difficult to keep a job, and legal problems may occur.



Treatment for children with Conduct Disorder is complex and challenging. The setting for treatment will depend on the severity of the behaviors. The child's uncooperative attitude and issues with authority figures will add to the difficulty of treatment. In developing a treatment plan, mental health professionals may use information from the child, family, teachers, and other medical specialties to understand the roots of the disorder in the particular child.

Behavioral therapy and psychotherapy are usually required to help the child learn anger management skills and problem-solving skills. If the child has learning disabilities, special education may be needed. Individual therapy may help the child with any coexisting mental health conditions. Parent training can help parents in handling their child's difficult behavior. Family therapy can help the family to learn to communicate and relate in new ways. Medications may be given for attention problems or depression.

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Sources

http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/conduct_disorder

<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/Ca-0010/default.asp>