

Behavioural and conduct problems

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at how to recognise signs of serious behavioural problems such as conduct disorder, and gives some practical advice about how to deal with this and get help.

Introduction

It takes time for children to learn how to behave properly. With help and encouragement from parents and teachers, most of them will learn quickly. All children will sometimes disobey adults. Occasionally, a child will have a temper tantrum, or an outburst of aggressive or destructive behaviour, but this is nothing to worry about.

Behavioural problems – the signs

Behavioural problems can occur in children of all ages. Very often they start in early life. Toddlers and young children may refuse to do as they are asked by adults, in spite of being asked many times. They can be rude, swear and have tantrums. Hitting and kicking of other people is common. So is breaking or spoiling things that matter to others.

Some children have serious behavioural problems. The signs of this to look out for are:

- if the child continues to behave badly for several months or longer, is repeatedly being disobedient, cheeky and aggressive
- if their behaviour is out of the ordinary, and seriously breaks the rules accepted in their family and community, this is much more than ordinary childish mischief or adolescent rebelliousness.

This sort of behaviour can affect a child's development, and can interfere with their ability to lead a normal life. When behaviour is this much of a problem, it is called a **conduct disorder**.

What does this mean?

Children with a conduct disorder may get involved in more violent physical fights, and may steal or lie, without any sign of remorse or guilt when they are found out. They refuse to follow rules and may start to break the law. They may start to stay out all night and truant from school during the day. Teenagers with conduct disorder may also take risks with their health and safety by taking illegal drugs or having unprotected sexual intercourse.

What effect can this have?

This kind of behaviour puts a huge strain on the family. Children who behave like this will often find it difficult to make friends. Even though they might be quite bright, they don't do well at school and are often near the bottom of the class. On the inside, the young person may be feeling that they are worthless and that they just can't do anything right. It is common for them to blame others for their difficulties if they do not know how to change for the better.

What causes oppositional defiant disorder/conduct disorder?

A child is more likely to develop an oppositional defiant disorder/conduct disorder if they:

- have a **difficult temperament**;
- have **learning or reading difficulties** – these make it difficult for them to understand and take part in lessons. It is then easy for them to get bored, feel stupid and misbehave;
- are **depressed**;
- have been **bullied or abused**;

- are **'hyperactive'** – this causes difficulties with self-control, paying attention and following rules (see Factsheet 5 on ADHD and hyperkinetic disorder).

Parents themselves can sometimes unknowingly make things worse by giving too little attention to good behaviour, always being too quick to criticise, or by being too flexible about the rules and not supervising their children adequately. This often happens if a parent is depressed, exhausted or overwhelmed.

Giving too little attention to good behaviour

As a parent, it can be easy to ignore your child when they are being good, and only pay attention to them when they are behaving badly. Over time, the child learns that they only get attention when they are breaking rules. Most children, including teenagers, need a lot of attention from their parents, and will do whatever it takes to get it. Perhaps surprisingly, they seem to prefer angry or critical attention to being ignored. It's easy to see how, over time, a 'vicious cycle' is set up.

Being too flexible about the rules

Children need to learn that rules are important and that 'no' means 'no'. Keeping this up is hard work for parents. It can be tempting to give in 'for a quiet life'. The trouble is that this teaches the child to

push the limits until they get what they want. Teenagers need to know that their parents care about them. They must also understand that rules are needed to protect their safety and that they must learn to live within these rules.

Where can I get help?

Parents can do a lot. It helps if discipline is fair and consistent, and it is crucial for both parents to agree on how to handle their child's behaviour (see Factsheet 2 on good parenting). All young people need praise and rewards when they improve their behaviour. This can be hard. Remember to praise even the small, everyday things, and let them know that you love and appreciate them.

It is worth asking the school about whether they are also worried about your child's behaviour. It is helpful if parents and teachers can work together. Extra teaching may be necessary. You can seek advice from the school nurse or from an educational psychologist.

If serious problems continue for more than 3 months, it is worth asking your health visitor or general practitioner for advice. If more specialist help is needed, they will be able to make a referral to your local child and adolescent mental health service. Specialists can help by finding out what is causing the problem, and also by suggesting practical ways of improving the difficult behaviour.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Hartley-Brewer, E. (1994) *Positive Parenting*. London: Vermilion.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.
- Webster Stratton, C. (1992) *The Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 3–8*. London: Umbrella Press.

Sources of further information

- EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children) provides useful alternatives to smacking. 77 Holloway Road, London N7 8JZ; tel: 020 7700 0627; www.ruralwellbeing.org.uk.
- NEWPIN (New Parent Information Network) offers support to parents with babies and toddlers. Sutherland House, 35 Sutherland Square, Walworth, London SE17 3EE; tel: 020 7358 5900; www.newpin.org.uk
- Parent Network provides support and holds parent education groups throughout the UK. 44–46 Caversham Road, London NW5 2DS; tel: 020 7485 8535.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.org.uk.