

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 33

(Updated July 2004)

CONDUCT DISORDER

“Conduct disorder” refers to a group of behavioral and emotional problems in youngsters. Children and adolescents with this disorder have great difficulty following rules 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 contribute to a child developing conduct disorder, including brain damage, child abuse, 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
- often initiates 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 confronting them (e.g. assault)
- forces someone into sexual activity

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 truant from school

Children who exhibit these behaviors should receive a comprehensive evaluation. 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

Conduct Disorder, “Facts for Families,” No. 33 (7/04)

have problems with relationships and holding a job. They often break laws or behave in an antisocial manner.

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, 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 assistance in devising and carrying out special management and educational programs in the home and at school. Treatment may also include medication in some youngsters, such as those with difficulty paying attention, impulse problems, or those with 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.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs

#55 Understanding Violent Behavior in Children and Adolescents

#72 Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder

#6 Children Who Can't Pay Attention

#12 Children Who Steal

#38 Bipolar Disorder in Children and Teens

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See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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