

Mental Health and Conduct Disorder

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Conduct disorder is a serious behavioral and emotional disorder that can occur in children and teens. A child with this disorder may display a pattern of disruptive and violent behavior and have problems following rules.

It is not uncommon for children and teens to have behavior-related problems at some time during their development. However, the behavior is considered to be a conduct disorder when it is long-lasting and when it violates the rights of others, goes against accepted norms of behavior and disrupts the child's or family's everyday life.

What Are the Symptoms of Conduct Disorder?

Symptoms of conduct disorder vary depending on the age of the child and whether the disorder is mild, moderate, or severe. In general, symptoms of conduct disorder fall into four general categories:

- **Aggressive behavior:** These are behaviors that threaten or cause physical harm and may include fighting, **bullying**, being cruel to others or animals, using weapons, and forcing another into sexual activity.
- **Destructive behavior:** This involves intentional destruction of property such as arson (deliberate fire-setting) and vandalism (harming another person's property).
- **Deceitful behavior:** This may include repeated lying, shoplifting, or breaking into homes or cars in order to steal.
- **Violation of rules:** This involves going against accepted rules of society or engaging in behavior that is not appropriate for the person's age. These behaviors may include running away, skipping

school, playing pranks, or being sexually active at a very young age.

In addition, many children with conduct disorder are irritable, have low self-esteem, and tend to throw frequent **temper tantrums**. Some may abuse drugs and alcohol. Children with conduct disorder often are unable to appreciate how their behavior can hurt others and generally have little guilt or remorse about hurting others.

What Causes Conduct Disorder?

The exact cause of conduct disorder is not known, but it is believed that a combination of biological, genetic, environmental, psychological, and social factors play a role.

- **Biological:** Some studies suggest that defects or injuries to certain areas of the **brain** can lead to behavior disorders. Conduct disorder has been linked to particular **brain** regions involved in regulating behavior, impulse control, and emotion. Conduct disorder symptoms may occur if nerve cell circuits along these **brain** regions do not work properly. Further, many children and teens with conduct disorder also have other mental illnesses, such as **attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**, learning disorders, **depression**, substance abuse, or an **anxiety disorder**, which may contribute to the symptoms of conduct disorder.
- **Genetics:** Many children and teens with conduct disorder have close family members with mental illnesses, including **mood disorders**, **anxiety disorders**, substance use disorders and personality disorders. This suggests that a vulnerability to conduct disorder may be at least partially inherited.
- **Environmental:** Factors such as a dysfunctional family life, childhood abuse, traumatic experiences, a family history of

substance abuse, and inconsistent discipline by parents may contribute to the development of conduct disorder.

- **Psychological:** Some experts believe that conduct disorders can reflect problems with moral awareness (notably, lack of guilt and remorse) and deficits in cognitive processing.
- **Social:** Low socioeconomic status and not being accepted by their peers appear to be risk factors for the development of conduct disorder.

How Common Is Conduct Disorder?

It is estimated that 2%-16% of children in the U.S. have conduct disorder. It is more common in boys than in girls and most often occurs in late childhood or the early teen years.

How Is Conduct Disorder Diagnosed?

As with adults, mental illnesses in children are diagnosed based on signs and symptoms that suggest a particular problem. If symptoms of conduct disorder are present, the doctor may begin an evaluation by performing complete medical and psychiatric histories. A **physical exam** and laboratory tests (for example, neuroimaging studies, **blood** tests) may be appropriate if there is concern that a physical illness might be causing the symptoms. The doctor will also look for signs of other disorders that often occur along with conduct disorder, such as **ADHD** and depression.

If the doctor cannot find a physical cause for the symptoms, they will likely refer the child to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or **psychologist**, mental health professionals who are specially trained to diagnose and treat mental illnesses in children and teens.

Psychiatrists and psychologists use specially designed interview and assessment tools to evaluate a child for a mental disorder. The doctor bases their diagnosis on reports of the child's symptoms and their

observation of the child's attitudes and behavior. The doctor will often rely on reports from the child's parents, teachers, and other adults because children may withhold information or otherwise have trouble explaining their problems or understanding their symptoms.

How Is Conduct Disorder Treated?

Treatment for conduct disorder is based on many factors, including the child's age, the severity of symptoms, as well as the child's ability to participate in and tolerate specific therapies. Treatment usually consists of a combination of the following:

- **Psychotherapy:** Psychotherapy (a type of counseling) is aimed at helping the child learn to express and control anger in more appropriate ways. A type of therapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy aims to reshape the child's thinking (cognition) to improve problem solving skills, **anger management**, moral reasoning skills, and impulse control. Family therapy may be used to help improve family interactions and communication among family members. A specialized therapy technique called parent management training (PMT) teaches parents ways to positively alter their child's behavior in the home.
- **Medication:** Although there is no **medication** formally approved to treat conduct disorder, various drugs may be used (off label) to treat some of its distressing symptoms (impulsivity, aggression, dysregulated mood), as well as any other mental illnesses that may be present, such as **ADHD** or **major depression**.

What Is the Outlook for Children With Conduct Disorder?

If your child is displaying symptoms of conduct disorder, it is very important that you seek help from a qualified doctor. A child or teen with conduct disorder is at risk for developing other mental disorders as

an adult if left untreated. These include antisocial and other personality disorders, mood or anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders.

Children with conduct disorder are also at risk for school-related problems, such as failing or dropping out, substance abuse, legal problems, injuries to self or others due to violent behavior, sexually transmitted diseases, and suicide. Treatment outcomes can vary greatly, but early intervention may help to reduce the risk for incarcerations, mood disorders, and the development of other comorbidities such as substance abuse.

Can Conduct Disorder Be Prevented?

Although it may not be possible to prevent conduct disorder, recognizing and acting on symptoms when they appear can minimize distress to the child and family, and prevent many of the problems associated with the condition. In addition, providing a nurturing, supportive, and consistent home environment with a balance of love and discipline may help reduce symptoms and prevent episodes of disturbing behavior.

WebMD Medical Reference

<https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/mental-health-conduct-disorder>