

# Conduct Disorder

## TIP

Insist on the best. Find out who in your community has the most experience and expertise in evaluating and treating your child's mental illness. Talk to mental health specialists, school professionals, and other parents.

64

Conduct Disorder is a group of behavioral and emotional problems in children. These general behavioral and emotional problems usually result in the child having difficulty following rules and behaving in a socially acceptable way. As a result, many children with Conduct Disorder are viewed by others as “bad” or delinquent, rather than as having a mental illness. Most children will test their parents’ rules at some point during their development. However, when a child “goes to the extreme” in breaking these rules, then he or she may have Conduct Disorder.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Typical signs and symptoms of Conduct Disorder include aggression, rule violation, and property destruction. Some examples of potential behaviors include:

- Bullying, threatening, or intimidating others
- Initiating physical fights with others
- Using a weapon that could cause serious physical harm to others (for example, a bat, brick, broken bottle, knife, or gun)
- Being physically cruel to others
- Stealing from someone while confronting him or her (for example, assault)
- Forcing someone into sexual activity
- Staying out at night often despite parental objections
- Running away from home
- Skipping school often
- Breaking into someone else's building, house, or car
- Lying to obtain goods or favors or to avoid obligations
- Stealing from someone without confronting him or her (for example, shoplifting without breaking and entering)
- Setting fire to property or objects

## EVALUATION AND DIAGNOSIS

It is crucial for Conduct Disorder to be diagnosed early to reduce the risk of the child getting hurt or hurting others, as well as reduce the risk of the child getting involved with the judicial system. Conduct Disorder can be diagnosed at any time in childhood or adolescence. It is especially important to address Conduct

Disorder in young children, as this disorder tends to be more problematic when it starts at a young age. If you think your child has Conduct Disorder, your child may need a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation or psychotherapy evaluation. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATIONS (p39)**.

### TYPICAL CO-EXISTING DIAGNOSES

Most children with Conduct Disorder have other mental health diagnoses. Common mental health diagnoses that co-exist with Conduct Disorder include:

- Anxiety Disorders (p48)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (p52)
- Depression (p67)
- Learning Disorders (p75)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (p82)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p84)
- Substance Abuse and Dependence (p94)

### TREATMENT

Early treatment of Conduct Disorder is important and can help a child develop into a healthy adult. However, treatment is complex and depends on the severity of a child's case. In many cases a comprehensive and team-based approach to treatment is used. The team should include family, school professionals, and other professionals who can hold the child responsible for his or her behavior and help the child avoid problems with the law. In addition to the child's pediatrician, the team could include a child and adolescent psychiatrist, a psychotherapist, and an advanced practice registered nurse. For more information on mental health specialists, turn to page 106 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**. A care manager can also help coordinate a child's treatment. For more information on health insurance care managers, turn to page 144 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.



## *Caring for a child with Conduct Disorder*

65

It can be very difficult to care for a child with Conduct Disorder and get him or her the services that he or she needs. If your child has Conduct Disorder, you may need someone to step in and help.

If your child has a mental health issue in addition to Conduct Disorder, you may want to file a voluntary petition. This petition is a request for services that your insurance may not pay for. If approved, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) would step in and pay for these services. These services include residential facilities or special schools for your child.

If your child has Conduct Disorder without another co-existing mental illness and you are having trouble managing him or her, you may want to file a wayward petition. This petition is a request for the judicial system to take over the care of your child. This is often a "last resort" for parents. Your child will get the services he or she needs, but you will have to hand over the care of your child to the courts.

**A Diversionary Program is a program designed to divert children from the most restrictive settings in either the mental health or juvenile justice system. These programs can help children who have begun to have problems with the law. The programs focus on positive behaviors and help children avoid future law-breaking activities and prosecution.**



Comprehensive treatment for Conduct Disorder needs to occur over a long period of time. Treatment needs to individually address each of the causes for the child's behaviors. Depending of the particular situation, different treatments, including medication, may be needed. Parent management training is an essential part of treatment for Conduct Disorder. In addition, psychotherapy (particularly, cognitive behavioral therapy) may also be very helpful. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT (p147)**.

It is important to note that some types of treatment do not work. For example, group psychotherapy is not a recommended form of treatment for children with Conduct Disorder. In addition, inoculation approaches are not effective. Inoculation approaches are "scared straight" methods that try to prevent the behavior by scaring the child with the consequences of the behavior. Examples of these approaches include putting a child in jail for a few days or sending him or her to boot camp.

If Conduct Disorder is affecting the child's ability to learn, adjustments may need to be made in his or her education program. For more information on the school system, turn to page 118 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

A child with Conduct Disorder may also benefit from a diversionary program that would address the child's risk for entering the legal system.

## RESOURCES

*The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children* (2005)

By Ross Greene

[www.explosivechild.com](http://www.explosivechild.com)

Foundation For Children with Behavioral Challenges

[www.fcbsupport.org](http://www.fcbsupport.org)

*It's Nobody's Fault: New Hope and Help For Difficult Children* (1997)

By Harold Koplewicz