

# Understanding Conduct Disorder in Children



Your 14-year-old child steals money from your purse. Your child lies about where they're going and they often skip school. You may think this is normal for teens. But it may be conduct disorder, which can be treated. If your child's actions are causing you concern, don't lose hope. Many caring people can help. Talk with a mental health professional, your pediatrician, your school psychologist or counselor, or your local mental health clinic.

## What is conduct disorder?

Children with conduct disorder often behave in violent or harmful ways. They may lie, steal, or get into frequent fights. They might even carry weapons, kill animals, or attack others. Sometimes these children are seen as delinquents. At other times, their actions may be dismissed as normal. Neither is true. In fact, many may have problems that have been missed or ignored. Some may have had a severe injury to the head or face. Some may be depressed or have other emotional problems.

## Who does it affect?

Conduct disorder is the term used for a group of specific behavioral or emotional problems in children. Children and teens with this condition have problems with socially acceptable behavior. They also have trouble following rules. Conduct disorder is one of the most easily identified emotional disorders in preteens and teens. It affects far more boys than girls.

## What can help?

Treatment for children with conduct disorders is complex and challenging. The treatment setting depends on how severe the behaviors are. A full check from multiple professionals familiar with the condition is critical. Behavior therapy is very helpful for children with conduct disorder. The goal of treatment is to help them understand how their actions affect others. Involving school staff such as school psychologists, counselors, and teachers helps provide coordinated care. Certain medicines may also help ease symptoms of conduct disorder. Many children with conduct disorder also have a second mental health problem that may be treated with medicine.

The earlier treatment begins, including regular home and school interventions and any needed medicines, the better for the child. Aggressive behavior that is not treated becomes more difficult to change as a child gets older.

## Your role

Dealing with conduct disorder can be very stressful. Coping with conduct disorder can tear families apart just when a child needs love more than ever. Your consistency in following the treatment plan, supporting and caring are key parts of the healing process. Don't try to manage it alone. Stay in close contact with school staff and let them know if something isn't working. Ask them and your child's medical treatment team for support. Always tell professionals if your child shows new aggressive behaviors or if there is danger to the safety of others. This includes aggressive behavior toward other children, adults, or animals. The school staff and the medical team may also know of parent or family support groups that may be helpful to both parents and siblings as well.

## What to watch for

Not every child who gets into trouble has conduct disorder. But signs to watch for include:

- Stealing
- Constant lying

- Setting fires on purpose
- Skipping school
- Breaking into homes or cars
- Destroying others' property
- Being cruel to animals or humans
- Forcing sex on others
- Starting fights often
- Using weapons in fights
- Showing no empathy for the people or animals they have hurt
- Showing little or no remorse for disruptive or dangerous behaviors

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