

Conduct Disorder¹

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Conduct Disorder is a childhood behavior disorder characterized by a **consistent pattern** of harming others or their property, stealing, lying, or breaking major accepted rules or standards of behavior. Children must be developmentally able to understand and follow these rules and standards of behavior in order to be considered as having Conduct Disorder.

Isolated instances of extreme misbehavior, running away, stealing, etc. are not enough to warrant a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder. Most children display instances of surprisingly poor judgment and bad behavior at least once during their childhood.

On the other hand, children with Conduct Disorder consistently break rules, often act in aggressive or threatening ways, and may destroy property, and show little regard for others. These behaviors must occur **over an extended period of time**. In fact, a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder is not considered unless the child has displayed such behavior for a year or more.

How they Deal with the World

Children with Conduct Disorder often view the world as a hostile and threatening place. They may be quick to mistakenly believe that others are acting aggressively or hostile toward them. They may also "tattle" on friends and blame others for their own mistakes.

These children often have difficulty maintaining friendships. Friends and family members become upset with their misbehavior and often become more irritated when the children do not show remorse or guilt over their actions. They often have low self-esteem, even though their behavior may make them appear tough, "cocky" or self-assured.

Other Common Problems

Children with Conduct Disorder are at high risk for school and work problems. These difficulties are often due to problems in their ability to do schoolwork as well as their difficulties getting along with others. These children may also participate in crimes and are often involved with the court system. They are also more likely to smoke, use alcohol or illegal drugs, engage in early sexual activity, and

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other reckless behaviors. These behaviors increase the risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Differences Between Boys and Girls

Boys are more likely to be diagnosed with Conduct Disorder than girls. Boys are also more likely to show aggressive behavior, threats, vandalism, and confrontational behavior than girls. Girls with Conduct Disorder are more likely to lie, skip school, run away, and shoplift, and are less confrontational in their behavior.

How Old Are They?

The diagnosis of Conduct Disorder typically occurs when children are in their late grade school to early high school years. However, children as young as 5-6 years old can be diagnosed with the condition. A majority of children stop showing Conduct Disorder behaviors by the time they reach adulthood; however, some individuals continue to have similar problems through adulthood.

Signs of Conduct Disorder

The following is a list of signs taken from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual text revision (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) that indicates a child may have Conduct Disorder. Remember, a child must show a **pattern** of at least 3 of these behavior groups **for at least a year** before the diagnosis can be considered.

Aggression to People and Animals

1. Frequently bullies, threatens, or intimidates others.
2. Frequently starts physical fights.
3. Uses weapons that can cause serious harm (e.g., a bat, brick, broken bottle, knife, gun).
4. Has been physically cruel to people, hurting others on purpose, physically torturing siblings and peers.
5. Has been physically cruel to animals, torturing animals.

6. Has stolen in an aggressive/confrontational way (e.g., mugging, purse snatching, extortion, armed robbery -- not shoplifting).

7. Has forced someone into sexual activity.

Destruction of Property

1. Has started fires intending to destroy things.
2. Has purposely destroyed other's property.

Deceitfulness or Theft

1. Has broken into someone else's house, building, or car.
2. Lies, cons or cheats others.
3. Has stolen items without confronting a victim (e.g., shoplifting, but without breaking and entering; forgery).

Serious Violations of Rules

1. Disobeys curfews, beginning before age 13.
2. Has run away from home overnight at least twice (or once for a long time).
3. Skips school, beginning before age 13.

While this report gives specific information for identifying signs of Conduct Disorder in children, parents and individuals should not try to diagnose any type of behavioral or emotional disorder in their children or themselves. A diagnosis of Conduct Disorder can only be made with confidence by a mental health professional who has been specifically trained in the assessment and treatment of this disorder.

Reference

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th ed.) text revision.