

Conduct disorders

All children and teens will disobey adults at times. It takes time for children to learn to behave and the occasional outburst is a normal part of growing up. Sudden outbursts of behaviour such as tantrums, refusing to do as they are told, hitting, kicking and breaking things are all normal signs of development if they occur infrequently and don't violate the rights of others. However, some children and teens have serious behavioural problems that can last over a long period of time and can affect their ability to lead a normal life.

When their behaviour becomes this much of a problem, it is called conduct disorder.

What causes conduct disorder?

Conduct disorder can occur in children of all ages but more often start in early life. Boys are more often diagnosed than girls. And in the UK it is estimated that approximately five per cent of the population under the age of 15 has conduct disorder. The exact cause of conduct disorders is unknown but there are several factors that make them more likely to develop.

These include:

- a difficult temperament
- learning or reading difficulties
- depression
- a history of being bullied or abused
- hyperactivity

What are the signs and symptoms of conduct disorder?

Common signs and symptoms include:

- aggressive behaviour towards people or animals
- destructive behaviour towards other people's property
- lying
- stealing
- playing truant from school

For older children and teens this can also include smoking, drinking alcohol, substance abuse and engaging in unprotected sexual activities.

How is conduct disorder normally diagnosed?

Children with suspected conduct disorders should be taken to the doctor. A GP can then perform a physical examination and take a complete medical history. Although there are no specific tests to diagnose a conduct disorder, the doctor may suggest a blood test or X-ray to rule out illness or any side effects from medication. The doctor will also look for any signs of other disorders that can occur alongside conduct disorder, such as ADHD and depression.

If conduct disorder is still suspected, the doctor may then refer the child to a professional in child psychology. This can be either a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Psychiatrists and psychologists are specially trained to diagnose and treat medical illnesses in children and teenagers. They will use a variety of interview and assessment tools to make a diagnosis.

How is conduct disorder normally treated?

Treatment for conduct disorder will depend on the child's age, severity of symptoms and the child's ability to tolerate specific therapies. The main form of treatment for conduct disorder is a form of psychotherapy called cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). This helps to improve a child's problem-solving skills, anger management and impulse control. Family therapy may also be used to improve interactions and communications between family members.

Sometimes medication is prescribed. Although there is no specific medication for conduct disorder, it can be used to treat some of the mental illnesses associated with it, such as depression and ADHD.

What happens next?

Conduct disorder can be treated successfully if diagnosed early. Some children with more severe and frequent symptoms can go on to develop personality disorders as adults, or drug and legal problems.

Other possible complications of conduct disorder are a tendency towards violence and suicidal feelings.

Can conduct disorder be prevented?

Although it might not be possible to prevent conduct disorder, many of the problems associated with the condition can be minimised with early intervention. Providing a nurturing, supportive and consistent home environment with a balance of love and discipline can also help reduce symptoms and sometimes prevent episodes of difficult behaviour.