Conduct Disorder
Facts for Families

What is conduct disorder?

Children and youth with conduct disorder display a pattern of aggressive and destructive behavior. They show a lack of respect for authority and often have behavioral problems such as stealing, lying, harming animals or destroying property.

There are 3 types of conduct disorder:

- Childhood-onset – youth who show these behaviors before age 10.
- Adolescent-onset – youth who show these behaviors after age 10 but did not meet the conduct disorder criteria before the age of 10.
- Children of any age with limited positive social behaviors, such as, lack of empathy, lack of remorse or guilt, and shallow or superficial expression of feelings.

Conduct disorder may be described as mild, moderate or severe. This depends on the number of problem behaviors your child shows and their impact on other people. Conduct behaviors can disrupt your child’s life, at home, school, church or in the neighborhood.

What are the symptoms of conduct disorder?

If your child has a conduct disorder, they may show one or more of these behaviors:

- May be considered a “bully” at school or at home
- Intimidates, threatens others or starts fights
- Is physically cruel to people or animals
- Engages in criminal-type behavior like vandalism

The signs and symptoms considered in the diagnosis of conduct disorder in children and teens fall into 4 categories. We look for at least 4 specific symptoms across these areas:

- Physical aggression to people or animals
- Property destruction
- Deceitfulness (lying) or theft
- Serious rule violations, such as running away or staying out all night

How common is conduct disorder?

Conduct disorder is a problem faced by roughly 6 out of 100 children and teens.

To Learn More
- Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine
  206-987-2164, option 4
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services
- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
| What causes conduct disorder? | It is not known exactly what causes conduct disorder. However, there is a strong relationship between conduct disorder, family conflict, and harsh parenting practices where punishment is used more than reward or positive reinforcement. Studies show that conduct disorder may continue when there are poor parenting practices and coercive (intimidating) family interactions. |
| Why is it so important to help my child with conduct disorder? | Conduct disorder behaviors can be very hard for you as a parent or caregivers to manage. It’s worth your hard work to intervene and help your child as children and youth with conduct disorder have a higher chance of problematic behaviors such as those listed below. The therapy goal is to help avoid these negative outcomes:  
- Illegal drug use  
- School drop out  
- Violent behavior  
- Severe family conflict  
- Breaking the law  
- Being placed in the juvenile justice system and out-of-home placements |
| How is conduct disorder treated? | There are 5 main types of treatment for youth with conduct disorder: |
| **Parent Management Training**  
(Sometimes called Behavioral Parent Training) | This is the most common treatment for conduct disorder. This includes teaching you how to use discipline strategies to manage your child’s disruptive behaviors; for example, rewarding positive social behaviors. |
| **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for adolescents** | This approach can help adolescents improve several areas of functioning by focusing on setting positive goals and developing problem-solving skills. It also works on strengthening relationships and learning how to resolve interpersonal conflicts, and avoiding involvement with negative influences in the community. |
| **Multisystemic Therapy (MST)** | MST is a community-based therapy that involves family, school and individual. It focuses on improving family dynamics, academic functioning and improving your child’s behavior across different settings.  
This is the most effective (most evidence-based) treatment for conduct disorder. MST is difficult to coordinate, but with a combination of individual therapy, parent management training and school advocacy, therapy results can come close. |
**Intensive community-based treatment**  
Includes Wraparound Services such as WISe services operated by county in Washington State  
Also includes participation in therapeutic schools and residential treatment centers. This treatment can provide structured programs in controlled environments to reduce disruptive behaviors.

**Medication**  
This can be helpful when a child has more than one disorder, such as ADHD and mood disorders.

**Is treatment helpful?**  
Due to the severity and persistence of conduct disorder, interventions from many areas are often needed. Drawing in the help of many programs can help target your child’s problems and support the development of their strengths. This will involve ongoing monitoring and coordination among home, school and community settings. Behavioral therapy targeting home and school behavior has been shown to lower noncompliance, rule breaking, and aggression both in the short and long term.