

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS



What Is Disruptive Behavior?

Disruptive behavior refers to **difficulty regulating or controlling feelings and behaviors**. In children, this can include:

- > Temper tantrums (verbal or physical outbursts)
- > Being touchy or easily annoyed
- > Feeling angry and resentful
- > Arguing with adults, even about small things
- > Refusing to obey adults/authority figures
- > Intentionally annoying others
- > Blaming others for their misbehavior

Young children normally have difficulty controlling their feelings and behaviors, but this difficulty should decrease as the child grows older.

When Is Disruptive Behavior A Problem?

Disruptive behaviors become a problem when they are **inappropriate for the child's age, occur often in multiple settings**, and cause **impairment at home, in school, and/or in the community**. These behaviors are then called a disruptive behavior **disorder**.

How Is A Disruptive Behavior Disorder Diagnosed?

Your child's **primary care practitioner (PCP)** will be able to recognize and treat **mild to moderate** forms of behavior disorders. For more **severe or complicated forms, behavioral health specialists** experienced with children and adolescents are best trained to diagnose and treat the disorder.

What Causes A Disruptive Behavior Disorder?

Disruptive behavior disorders often result from a combination of factors. Children who develop these disorders can be strong-willed and have intense, negative feelings, which can make them challenging for parents to manage. These children may also lack a positive attachment to a parent or experience a lot of stress or a lack of predictable structure in their home or community. Parents often have trouble identifying the most effective way to parent difficult-to-manage children. This makes parenting very challenging and often induces feelings of frustration, guilt, and shame.

Children with disruptive behaviors benefit when parents avoid ineffective parenting techniques. In simple terms, ineffective parenting strategies include authoritarian parenting, in which the parent may show too much anger or be too harsh; permissive parenting, in which the parent may give in to the demands of the child; and neglectful parenting, in which the parent is too busy or preoccupied to pay enough attention to the child. Parents with a difficult-to-manage child may use these ineffective strategies because they are overwhelmed; these are the strategies their parents used; they haven't had a chance to learn more effective strategies; or they don't realize their strategies are less effective than others. Despite the parent's best efforts, these ineffective parenting strategies can increase the risk of the child developing a disruptive behavior disorder.

How Is A Disruptive Behavior Disorder Treated?

The best treatment for a behavior disorder is helping the parent learn and practice more **effective parenting strategies**, as described below. These skills can be learned with the use of our **Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Families**, or by working with a behavioral health clinician (therapist), or both. Another treatment that can be helpful is **social-emotional skills training** for the child, which helps the child develop skills to identify and manage feelings, get along with others, and be able to make good decisions by slowing down and focusing on effective problem solving rather than their overwhelming feelings.

Things Parents Can Do to Help A Child With A Behavior Disorder

Improve your relationship with your child by spending positive time together every day

Though it may not feel like it, a child with disruptive behavior usually needs more quality time with you, not less. Let them choose an activity to do together, and focus on giving positive feedback and reducing criticism. Making time to connect in a positive way each day can strengthen your relationship and increase your child's motivation to behave.

Provide a predictable, structured household environment

Set clear expectations, follow routines/schedules, and apply consistent rules at home to support your child's emotion regulation, decision-making, and sense of safety.

Set clear and simple household rules

Focus on the 3 to 5 rules that are most important to your family. Review them with your child, and post them somewhere easy to see as a regular reminder.

Praise positive behaviors (such as ready for school and bed on time)

Children feel good when parents notice and acknowledge appropriate behavior, even when it's expected. Offer specific and genuine praise whenever you "catch your child being good" and see if that behavior increases.

Ignore annoying behaviors (such as whining), followed by praise when the annoying behavior ceases

No parent enjoys whining, complaining, or repetitive questions! When you tune this behavior out, your child learns it does not get your attention. As soon as the annoying behavior stops, try to praise your child for behaving more appropriately.

Give clear, calm, and simple directions for desired behaviors

Children with disruptive behavior typically get more instructions than other kids, so focus on the most important ones. Ensure your child is paying attention, give them specific and straightforward directions, and then stick around to see if they're followed.

Reward desired behaviors

Many children will work harder for something they want. Try to choose rewards that are simple, sustainable, desirable to your child, and acceptable to you. Remember that a free reward like a privilege or choice can matter as much as one that costs money!

Give consequences for dangerous or destructive behaviors (such as physical aggression or destroying things)

Respond to more serious misbehavior by removing your child from an enjoyable activity (a time out) or reducing access to preferred activities or attention (loss of privileges). To help them make better decisions, let your child know which negative behaviors lead to which consequences.

Plan ahead for situations in which the child is more likely to engage in misbehavior (such as at the grocery store)

Try to anticipate times when your child is more likely to act out, then take steps to decrease the chances that happens. If you know they are likely to be tired or bored, you can plan your schedule accordingly or provide appropriate distractions.



Ask your child's PCP to "prescribe" the Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Disruptive Behavior, so that you can begin to learn and practice behavior management skills at home!

This handout was created by Heather Walter, MD, MPH, Erica Lee, PhD, Keneisha Sinclair-McBride, PhD, and Zoë Judd, MS. © Boston Children's Hospital