

Conduct Disorder in Adolescents

The teen years can be challenging times for adolescents and their parents. The trials and tribulations of growing up can stimulate episodes of anger, rebellion and extreme irritability. For some teenagers, though, their behavior can go far out of normal bounds and escalate into a crisis. Criminal behavior, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual activity and self-destructive actions can assume life-threatening proportions.

Much of this disordered behavior can be self-directed and, while serious and worthy of professional evaluation, does not pose a threat to others. When the destructive behavior is aimed at others, then it is referred to as a “conduct disorder.” Teens with conduct disorder consistently violate the rights of others, or the laws of society, by stealing or vandalizing property, or by harming people or animals. Conduct disorder is more common in males than in females with nine percent of boys and two percent of girls being affected by this problem.

Angry and aggressive behavior is often the result of underlying conditions that, undetected and untreated through the years, have increasingly interfered with the teen’s ability to function and relate to others normally. These conditions cover a number of areas and include environmental, psychological and medical problems.

Traumatic events in the teen’s life such as illness, divorce or the death of someone close can create the stress that triggers a conduct disorder. Likewise, the existence of learning disorders or psychological conditions such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, can contribute to the development of a conduct disorder in the teenager. In addition, factors in the child’s upbringing such as parental rejection or neglect, harsh disciplinary measures or the lack of supervision can also lead to the development of conduct disorder.

How can you recognize conduct disorder in adolescents? There are a number of destructive behaviors that, individually or collectively, are characteristic of someone with a conduct disorder. These include:

- Consistently breaking rules set by parents, school officials or others
- Bullying, or threatening physical harm to people or animals
- Stealing and lying
- Damaging property, or other acts of vandalism
- Setting fires
- Showing no remorse or guilt, when accused of hurting others
- Abusing alcohol or drugs
- Mentioning or attempting suicide

We should emphasize that these disturbances are outside of the realm of “just growing up,” or “kids being kids.” The result of this behavior can be a significant impairment in the social or academic functioning of the person affected by the disorder. (continued)

What can parents do if they suspect that a teenager has a conduct disorder? Since the behavior associated with conduct disorder can be dangerous to the teenager in question, as well as others, parents need to be especially careful in evaluating their child's behavior. It is important to be objective about the severity of the behavior that they have observed and to be willing to seek professional help if the child or his associates are seen to be at risk of harm. The first step is to have the child thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended. Treatment can include counseling, therapy and medication, depending on the needs of the particular child.

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