



Parents Guide to Problem Behavior



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Why Do Some Kids Struggle With Problem Behavior?

When children have frequent emotional outbursts, it can be a sign that they haven't yet developed the skills they need to cope with feelings like frustration, anxiety and anger. Handling big emotions in a healthy, mature way requires a variety of skills, including:

- Impulse control
- Emotional self-regulation
- Problem solving
- Delaying gratification
- Negotiating
- Communicating wishes and needs to adults
- Knowing what's appropriate or expected in a given situation

Other children may seem to struggle more with boundaries and following rules. They may be defiant, or ignore instructions or try to talk their way out of things that aren't optional. You may notice patterns of behavior that seem to crop up at certain times of the day (like bedtime) during certain tasks (like during homework) or with certain people. You also might notice that your child acts out particularly when she is at home but not when she is at school, or vice versa.


Tantrums and other kinds of acting out are often a normal and even healthy part of childhood. They are a sign that a child is becoming more independent — indications that a child is testing boundaries, developing skills and opinions, and exploring the world around them.

But when a child is acting out a lot, it can strain the parent-child relationship, creating regular frustration and resentment that isn't healthy in the family. Whether your child is in the early stages of learning about self-regulation and boundaries, or if your family has been struggling and you are looking for help, this guide is designed to explain more about how kids learn to manage their behavior, what parents can do to aid in the process and how to get more support if you need it.

Tantrums can be a learned behavior

Sometimes parents feel that tantrums and other instances of problem behavior are intentional or manipulative. However, clinicians who specialize in children's behavior agree that tantrums are generally not a voluntary behavior on a child's part — but they may be what is known as a "learned behavior." That means that kids learn that having a tantrum gets them the result that they want.

In other words, while a child who struggles to control her emotions might not be consciously calculating her tantrums, she might resort to them because she hasn't learned a better way to solve problems or communicate her needs. Well-meaning parents often respond to tantrums by trying to fix whatever caused the problem — by comforting the child or giving her whatever she is asking for. Unfortunately, this reinforces the tantrum behavior, making kids more likely to continue having tantrums and less likely to develop more sophisticated ways to manage their feelings.



When kids are acting out parents often feel powerless.

Responding to Problem Behavior

When kids are acting out parents often feel powerless. You may have tried different techniques for discipline, but without much success. In fact, trying too many different strategies for managing disruptive behavior can sometimes be part of the problem, since kids respond better to firm boundaries that are consistently reinforced. But if you haven't seen progress before now, don't feel discouraged, because parents have more power than they may realize when kids are being oppositional. By using strategies that are informed by child psychologists who specialize in behavior management, you can begin to improve kids' behavior and even improve the parent-child relationship.

This section begins with some general rules of thumb recommended by behavior experts as effective strategies for responding to problem behavior in the moment. Next it examines problem behavior in greater depth, which can be helpful for parents who want to understand more about why kids act out, and how to tackle specific behaviors you would like to change.

Tips for responding in the moment:

- **Don't give in.** Resist the temptation to end your child's tantrum by giving her what she wants when she explodes. Giving in teaches her that tantrums work.
- **Remain calm.** Harsh or emotional responses tend to escalate a child's aggression, be it verbal or physical. By staying calm, you're also modeling for your child the type of behavior you want to see in him.
- **Ignore negative behavior and praise positive behavior.** Ignore minor misbehavior, since even negative attention like reprimanding or telling the child to stop can reinforce her actions. Instead, provide lots of labeled praise on behaviors you want to encourage. (Don't just say "good job," say "good job calming down.")

- **Use consistent consequences.** Your child needs to know what the consequences are for negative behaviors, such as time outs, as well as rewards for positive behaviors, like time on the iPad. And you need to show him you follow through with these consequences every time.
- **Wait to talk until the meltdown is over.** Don't try to reason with a child who is upset. You want to encourage a child to practice negotiating when she's not blowing up (and you're not either).

Targeting specific behaviors

When you are trying to manage disruptive behavior, it is helpful to identify specific behaviors that you are trying to change (or encourage). It's true that when families are feeling overwhelmed sometimes it can seem like every interaction is a struggle. However, identifying specific behaviors is an important first step to effective discipline. Taking behaviors one at a time allows you to be more focused, gain a better understanding of why the behavior is happening, and have a greater sense of control. Of course, there may be multiple behaviors that you would like to change, but evaluating them one by one is important.

Target behaviors should be:

- Specific (so expectations are clear to everyone in the family)
- Observable
- Measurable (so everyone can agree whether or not the behavior happened)

An example of a poorly defined behavior is "acting out" or "being good." A well-defined behavior would be running around the room (bad) or starting homework on time (good).

Before the behavior happens

When you are thinking about a particular behavior that you are targeting, it is important to think about what generally happens before that behavior and may be triggering it. This helps parents understand not only why a child might be acting out but also how anticipating certain triggers might help prevent those behaviors from happening. Parents can also examine the triggers that make positive behaviors (like obeying a command on the first time) more likely.

Potential triggers to avoid

These things often lead to misbehavior.

- **Assuming your expectations are understood:** Kids may not know what is expected of them — even if you assume they do. Demands change from situation to situation and when children are unsure of what they are supposed to be doing, they're more likely to misbehave.
- **Calling things out from a distance:** Tell your children important instructions when you are face-to-face. Directions that are yelled from a distance are less likely to be remembered and understood.
- **Transitioning without warning:** Transitions can be hard for kids, especially if they are in the middle of doing something they enjoy. When kids are given a warning and have a chance to find a good stopping place, transitions can be less fraught.
- **Asking rapid-fire questions, or giving a series of instructions:** Delivering a series of questions or instructions limits the likelihood that children will hear, answer questions, remember the tasks, and do what they've been instructed to do.

Potential triggers to embrace

These are things that can bolster good behavior.

- **Adjusting the environment:** Try to manage environmental and emotional factors that can make it much more difficult for children to rein in their behavior. Things to consider: hunger, fatigue, anxiety or distractions. When it's homework time, for instance, remove distractions like screens and toys, provide snacks, establish an organized place for kids to work and make sure to schedule some breaks.
- **Making expectations clear:** You and your child should be clear on what's expected. Even if he "should" know what is expected, clarifying expectations at the outset of a task helps head off misunderstandings down the line.
- **Providing countdowns for transitions:** Whenever possible, prepare children for an upcoming transition. For example, give her a 10-minute warning when it is time to come to dinner or start homework. Then follow up when there are 2 minutes left. Just as important as issuing the countdown is actually making the transition at the stated time.
- **Letting kids have a choice:** As kids grow up, it's important they have a say in their own scheduling. Giving a structured choice — "Do you want to take a shower after dinner or before?" — can help them feel empowered and encourage them to become more self-regulating.

After the behavior happens

Considering what happens after a targeted behavior is important because consequences can affect the likelihood of a behavior recurring. That is true for consequences that are positive (like getting an extra 10 minutes of screen time) or negative (like getting a time out).

Some consequences are more effective than others. Ideally consequences create structure and help kids understand the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. However, consequences can also do more harm than good when they are sending the wrong message. Understanding how to use smart and consistent consequences makes all the difference.

Consequences that aren't effective

These types of consequences are common, but they generally don't have the desired effect.

- **Giving negative attention:** It seems counterintuitive, but consequences that seem negative to us (like raising your voice or spanking) can sometimes reinforce the very behavior we are trying to prevent. That's because children value attention from the important adults in their life so much that any attention — positive or negative — is better than none. That's why negative attention can actually increase bad behavior over time. Responding to behaviors with criticism or yelling can also adversely affect children's self-esteem.
- **Delayed consequences:** Immediate consequences are the most effective. Children are less likely to link their behavior to a consequence if there is a lot of time between the two, which means delayed consequences are less likely to actually change a child's behavior.
- **Disproportionate consequences:** Parents can sometimes become so frustrated that they overreact when giving consequences, which is understandable. However, a huge consequence can be demoralizing for children, and they may give up even trying to behave.
- **Consequences that are accommodating:** When a child is slow to doing something you want him to do, like picking up his toys, many parents will become frustrated and just do it themselves. While this reaction is also understandable, it also increases the likelihood that he will dawdle again next time.

Consequences that are effective

Consequences that are more effective begin with generous attention to the behaviors you want to encourage.

- **Positive attention for positive behaviors:** Praising children when you “catch them being good” makes them more likely to repeat that good behavior in the future. Positive attention is also a good thing for the parent-child relationship, improves a child’s self-esteem, and feels good for everyone involved.
- **Ignoring actively:** This consequence might seem counterintuitive, but child behavior experts often teach “active ignoring” as an effective behavior management strategy. To perform active ignoring, deliberately withdraw your attention when a child starts to misbehave. As children learn that acting out doesn’t get them your attention, they will begin to do it less. An important component of active ignoring is to immediately give a child positive attention as soon as he exhibits behavior you *do* want to see, like sitting calmly. Of course, this consequence should be used only for minor misbehavior — active ignoring is not appropriate when a child is being aggressive or doing something dangerous.
- **Reward menus:** Rewards are a tangible way to give children positive feedback for desired behaviors. Rewards are most motivating when children can choose from a variety of desirable things: extra time on the iPad, a special treat, etc. Rewards should be linked to specific behaviors and always delivered consistently.
- **Time outs:** Time outs are one of the most effective consequences parents can use, but also one of the hardest to do correctly. Later in the guide there are tips on how to have a successful time out.

Targeting a specific behavior

Set a specific behavior that you want to target

Stop jumping on the couch

Examine triggers

Your daughter often starts jumping on the couch when you go to change the baby’s diaper or give him a bath.

Possible solution: Come up with ways your daughter can “help” you do these tasks. Her assistance may slow you down slightly, but it gives her something positive to do — and it makes her feel like she’s still getting your attention. When she helps out, praise her for being such a good big sister.

Examine consequences

Ineffective consequence: Yelling, “I’ve told you this a million times, Katie, you can’t jump on the couch!

Why do you keep doing it?!”

Effective consequence: Send to time out immediately.

Why Transitions Trigger Problem Behavior

One common problem behavior trigger for many children is transitions. Whether it's getting ready for bed, or coming to dinner, or putting down the video game controller, in many families transitions can become a flashpoint that everyone learns to dread.

If transitions are a problem for your child, it is important to figure out what about the transition is difficult. Often kids don't like stopping an activity that they are enjoying (like playing on the computer) in order to do something less fun, like getting ready to leave the house. While no one enjoys stopping fun things, some kids struggle with it more than others. That can be a sign that they are still developing emotional self-regulation skills, but it is just one possible cause. Other children struggle to cope with unanticipated changes in schedule, or moving on from something that they feel like they haven't finished.

Struggling with transitions can even be a sign of a mental health disorder in some children. Children with ADHD, autism, anxiety and OCD are all more likely to struggle with transitions.

Techniques to make transitions easier

Once you've narrowed down what you think might be behind your child's resistance to transitions, then you can start brainstorming what you think might help. (Note: If you think your child might have an undiagnosed mental health disorder, taking your concerns to a clinician is important.)

Here are some techniques that you might want to try:

Preview and countdown: Every morning, lay out what the day will look like. Before each transition, give a time frame and description of what will happen along with countdowns (in 20 minutes, then 10, then 5 it will be time to finish breakfast and head to school). This helps kids prepare emotionally.

Get their attention: For kids who struggle to regulate their attention, make a particular effort to capture theirs. Make eye contact, sit next to them, put your hand on their shoulder, or ask them to repeat back what you have said. It makes them more likely to follow through.

Use music: Songs can help kids (particularly young kids) ease into transitions. The "clean up" song is a popular example of this, but there are many songs that can be found or made up to suit a variety of situations from tying shoes to brushing teeth.

Visual cues: Posting a chart with pictures illustrating what to expect from a particular transition or the steps involved is a good visual reminder for children to fall back on.

Create routines: If there are transitions that your child struggles with every day, like going to bed, build some consistency and structure into that transition. For example, when it's close to bedtime, your child can pick one last thing she wants to do. Then, you both go upstairs to brush teeth and read a story, then it's lights out. Doing this routine consistently helps kids know what to expect and makes the transition easier.

Use rewards: Rewards can be an effective tool to use for difficult transitions until children have gotten used to them. Parents can use stickers, snacks, or a point system that leads to tangible rewards.

Appropriate consequences: If a transition isn't going well, think about what consequences you are (or aren't) giving. Yelling isn't an effective consequence, but active ignoring or a time out might be.

Use praise: When a child does follow through with a transition, make sure you give him some enthusiastic labeled praise to recognize his behavior. For example: "I really liked how you handed over the iPad right away and started brushing your teeth. Now we have more time to read!"

Skills: How to Do a Time Out

The point of a time out isn't to shame or punish your child, but to diffuse an emotional situation and help your child learn to manage frustration and regulate his own behavior. Using a time out is also a clear way to communicate that a particular behavior is unacceptable.

Many parents have tried time outs before with varying degrees of success. To be most effective, time outs need to be done consistently and follow certain steps. Here are some guidelines to follow if you are learning how to use time outs, or want to troubleshoot your technique.

Use advance warning: Kids need to understand which behaviors are linked to which consequences. Work with your child to establish which behaviors (like hitting or not complying with an instruction from you) lead to a time out so she knows what to expect.

Establish a pre-determined place: Designating a special chair, or a place on the stairs, also helps a child know what to expect. It's a good idea to call the time out chair just that, and not "the naughty chair" or something similar. Time outs work better when they are focused on teaching children how to behave, not on punishing them.



The point of a time out isn't to shame or punish your child.

Use a quick response: When a kid misbehaves in one of the ways you have discussed, make sure the following time out is immediate, and that you state the reason: “No hitting. Go to time out.” Be specific, brief, and unemotional. This helps ensure that the child is able to link her action with its consequence. Delayed consequences are ineffective because kids tend to feel you are just being punitive.

Keep it brief: A standard formula for time outs is one minute per year of age. Some experts recommend a timer so a child can see that the time is being measured.

Keep it calm: The goal in a time out is for kids to sit quietly. Some experts recommend not starting the allotted time until your child is quiet. Others feel this is too hard for young children. They require that the child be completely quiet for 5 seconds before ending the time out. This way kids learn to associate good behaviors with the end of the time out and it sends the message that yelling and screaming during a time out won't work.

Pay no attention: Kids in time out should be ignored — no talking to them or about them, even if they're whining, crying or protesting. By withdrawing your attention during the time out, you're sending the message that misbehaving is not the way to get what they want.

Consistency is key: It's tempting to put kids in time out whenever they're acting inappropriately or pushing your buttons, but using time outs randomly makes it more difficult for kids to make the connection between specific misbehaviors and their consequences. Also, it is important that the time out occurs each and every time the specific target behavior occurs. If not, you are encouraging the child to think that he might be able to get away with it.

No rewarding stimuli: In the time out chair the child should have no access to television, electronic devices, toys or games. If you're away from home, pick any spot that removes the child from distracting stimulation.

If a child won't stay in time out: If a child breaks the rules by leaving the time out chair too soon, put him in a backup time out area that he cannot escape from (like a bedroom where there aren't any rewarding stimuli such as television, toys or games). Briefly explain that he must stay there for one minute and be calm and quiet before he is allowed to leave. Once he does that he should be returned to the time out chair, and the time he must stay there is restarted. If he leaves the chair again, the cycle repeats. Your child should learn quickly that it's in his best interest to stay in the chair until the time is up.

After the time out

When kids are given time outs for not complying with your instructions, once a time out is finished, they should be asked to complete whatever task they were asked to do before the time out. This helps them understand that time outs aren't escape routes.

Once the time out is over, you want to resume giving them attention, tuning in to whatever they are doing/working on/playing so that you can "catch them being good" and specifically praise them for a positive behavior. For example, if your child completes her time out and then she plays gently with the dog, you'd want to let her know what she was doing right ("I love how nicely you're playing with the dog! You are using such nice gentle hands!") This is reassuring your child that although she had to go to time out, she also is completely capable of doing good and positive things that make you proud and loving toward her.

Skills: How to Give Effective Instructions

Children will be more likely to understand and comply with your instructions if you follow these guidelines:

- **Be direct.** Make statements rather than asking questions: "Please sit down," as opposed to "Are you ready to get out your homework?"
- **Be close.** Give instructions when you are near your child, rather than calling out from across the room.
- **Use clear and specific commands.** Instead of "Go ahead," say, "Please go start your reading assignment."
- **Give age-appropriate instructions.** Speak to your child at a level he will understand. If your child is younger, keep things simple and use words you know he knows: "Please pick up the ball." With older children, it's important to be clear without being patronizing.
- **Give instructions one at a time.** Especially for kids who have attention challenges, try to avoid giving a series of instructions: "Please put on your sneakers, get your lunch off the kitchen counter, and meet me in the front hall."
- **Keep explanations simple.** Giving a rationale can increase the likelihood children will listen to a command, but not if the commands gets lost in it. For instance: "Go get your coat on because it's raining and I don't want you to catch a cold." Instead, try: "It's raining and I don't want you to catch a cold. Go get your coat on."
- **Give kids time to process.** After you give an instruction, wait a few seconds, without repeating what you said. Children then learn to listen to calm instructions given once rather than learning that they don't need to listen because the instructions will be repeated.

Improving the Parent-Child Relationship

One of the most unpleasant side effects of behavioral problems is the toll they take on the family dynamic. When a child has chronic behavior issues parents often aren't enjoying the time they spend with their child. This can be both frustrating and guilt-inducing. Children are also negatively affected when they receive frequent criticism or pick up on their parent's irritation, which can lead to resentment and may damage their self-esteem.

Improving the parent-child relationship should be a priority for all families dealing with chronic problem behavior. To that end, try to increase the number of interactions you have with your child that are positive and don't promote conflict. For example:

- Use behavior management strategies that reinforce what you do want to see (like giving clear instructions in a neutral tone of voice or using lots of labeled praise) instead of comments that are critical or focus on what you don't want to see.
- Pay attention to your own emotions and look for healthy ways to deal with stressful situations without escalating them. Use your own emotional self-regulation skills or give yourself a time out if you need a moment to cool down.
- Like in any relationship you want to nurture, think about how you can build on (or create) meaningful bonds. Are there common interests you can cultivate? New relationship rituals you can establish?
- Set aside a small amount of time every day to be present and nonjudgmental with your child.



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How to establish daily quality time

Even a small amount of time set aside reliably every day can become something children and parents learn to look forward to. This should be a time for positive connection, without rules or commands, to help everyone in the family defuse stress and appreciate each other's company. This should be considered special time and should not be contingent on a child's good behavior. Here are some tips for success:

- Aim for 5 minutes per day with younger kids, 15 minutes with teens
- Let your child choose an activity she enjoys and you join in
- Actively listen and let her lead the conversation
- Validate her choices and interests
- Focus on giving positive attention to good behavior
- Ignore minor misbehavior
- Avoid directing the activity or criticizing

Helping Kids Deal With Big Emotions

Some children act out because they have a hard time regulating their own emotions. This is a common problem for young children who haven't yet developed the ability to cope with big emotions in a constructive way. Some children continue to struggle with self-regulation as they get older. Parents and teachers may notice that they seem particularly sensitive and have outsized emotional reactions compared to their siblings or peers.

The good news is that self-regulation is a skill that can be taught like any other, and parents can play a big role in helping kids learn how to handle their emotions, even very big emotions. Here are some techniques for helping kids calm down instead of act out.

Developing emotional IQ

Taking the time to notice and label emotions helps kids begin to pay attention to how they are feeling. This is important because paying attention to our emotions is the first step to learning how to manage them. Sometimes just articulating an emotion helps to defuse it. Too often we try to pretend we aren't feeling negative emotions until it's too late and we are feeling terrible. Acknowledging a negative feeling can make it seem less powerful and helps you begin to think constructively about what to do with that feeling.

Parents can help teach children to do this by modeling it in their own behavior. For example, if you are upset because you forgot something at the grocery store, share that feeling: "I'm so frustrated right now! I forgot to get milk!" Then, after you've acknowledged how you feel, you can model coping and problem solving skills. You might say, "I'm going to take some deep breaths to calm down — that often helps me." Then once you're feeling better, you can say, "Now how can I solve this problem?" and brainstorm ideas.

Children will begin to pick up on the skills that you are modeling for them, but they might also need some extra support as they begin to learn how to deal with their emotions. If you notice your child is beginning to look upset, ask her to describe how she is feeling. Can she label it?

Just make sure if your child tells you that she's feeling sad, or anxious, or angry, you don't immediately try to talk her out of it. Sometimes hearing "Oh, it isn't that bad!" can make kids feel like their emotions are wrong and inadvertently teach them that they shouldn't share how they are feeling. Instead, you can validate the emotion ("Yes, that does sound frustrating" or "You do look disappointed") and then encourage healthy ways of dealing with that feeling.



Acknowledging a negative feeling can make it seem less powerful.

Heading off big emotions

Another important part of a child learning to consciously label his emotions is that it encourages him to start paying attention to how he feels, which means that he might notice an emotion earlier, before it starts to feel overwhelming.

Parents can sometimes be blindsided by the strong emotions children show during tantrums. But kids don't go from calm to sobbing on the floor in an instant — even if it seems like that. Emotions build over time, like a wave. Kids can learn to manage those emotions that seem overwhelming by noticing and labeling them earlier, before that wave gets too big.

Many kids benefit from ranking how strong their emotions are on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being calm and 10 being furious. You can model doing this, too. When you are feeling frustrated because you forgot to get milk at the grocery store, you might announce that you're at a 4. It might feel silly to do this at first, but it teaches kids to pause and notice how they are feeling. For kids who appreciate visual aids, something like a "feelings thermometer" might help.

Getting Help

When to get help

Most children have occasional tantrums or meltdowns. Acting out when it's time to go to bed or stop playing a game is par for the course. But when kids are having tantrums often, or it seems like they can't control their temper a lot of the time, you may be seeing something more extreme than typical problem behavior.

Here are some signs to look out for:

- When problem behavior is interfering with his ability to make friends or get along with other kids.
- When problem behavior is causing a lot of conflict at home and disrupting family life
- When your child feels like she can't control her anger, and it is making her feel bad about herself
- When his behavior is causing trouble at school with his teachers or his fellow students
- When her behavior is dangerous to herself or others

If you are worried about your child's behavior and are having a hard time managing it on your own, making

an appointment with a clinician who has expertise in children's mental health can be very helpful. A clinician can perform a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether your child may have an undiagnosed mental health disorder that is contributing to her behavior issues, or recommend specific strategies or treatments that might be helpful.

For more information about how to find a clinician who can help, read the Child Mind Institute's Parents Guide to Getting Good Care.

Possible causes and diagnoses

Below is a list of some mental health disorders and other challenges that may be associated with disruptive behavior.

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Children with ADHD find it unusually difficult to concentrate on tasks, pay attention, sit still and control impulsive behavior. While disruptive behavior is not a symptom of ADHD itself, it is often the result of ADHD symptoms. Inattention and impulsivity can make it very difficult for kids to tolerate tasks that are repetitive, boring or take a lot of effort. Because of this, children with ADHD are frequently overwhelmed with frustration, and throwing a shoe or pushing someone or yelling "shut up!" can be the result of their impulsivity. Some kids with ADHD can also develop negative behavior patterns, which are a response to years of finding themselves in conflict with adults.

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)

Children with ODD have a well-established pattern of behavior problems, with symptoms including arguing with authority figures, refusing to follow rules, blaming others for their mistakes, being unusually angry and irritable, and more. All children can have these symptoms from time to time. What distinguishes ODD from normal oppositional behavior is how severe it is, and how long it has been going on for.

Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD)

Children with DMDD experience frequent, severe temper outbursts that seem grossly out of proportion to the situation at hand. In between tantrums they are chronically irritable. Their disruptive behavior is a result of their very big emotions and poor self-regulation skills. Children with DMDD often feel very apologetic after a tantrum is over.

Anxiety

Children who seem angry and defiant may be severely anxious. When children are having a hard time coping with situations that cause them distress, they may lash out. This may happen when the demands at home or school put

a pressure on them that they can't handle. In an anxiety-inducing situation, your child's "fight or flight" instinct may take hold — she may have a tantrum or refuse to do something to avoid the source of acute fear.

Trauma

Children who have been traumatized frequently mask their pain with behavior that is aggressive. As a result of their trauma they may be struggling with poor emotional self-regulation, negative thinking, and be overly alert to dangers — and more likely to jump into their "fight or flight" response in an effort to protect themselves.

Learning problems

Children who act out repeatedly in school or during homework time may have an undiagnosed learning disorder. They may be feeling frustrated and ashamed because they are struggling to do things that look easy for other kids, and they don't know why. Rather than ask for help, they may rip up assignments or act out to create a diversion from their real issues.

Sensory processing issues

Some children have trouble processing the sensory information they are getting from the world around them. Children who are under- or over-sensitive to stimulation can often feel uncomfortable, anxious, distracted and overwhelmed, which can frequently lead to disruptive behavior.

Autism

Children on the autism spectrum tend to be rigid — needing consistent routine to feel safe — and unexpected changes can lead to them having a tantrum. Autistic children can also struggle with sensory issues that leave them feeling overwhelmed. Some autistic children may also lack the language and communication skills to express what they want or need.

Parent training programs

Parent training programs are designed to bolster the skills parents may need for managing a child's problem behavior and improve the parent-child relationship. These programs are led by psychologists and social workers and are evidence-based, which means they have been thoroughly tested and found to be effective for many families.

Below is a list of different kinds of parent training, including what makes them different and which families they may work best for.

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Parents and children both participate in PCIT sessions, during which a clinician teaches them skills to interact in a positive, productive way. It is effective for kids between the ages of 2 and 7, and usually requires 14 to 17 weekly sessions.

In PCIT, parents receive live coaching (via a bug in the ear) from a therapist who watches from behind a one-way mirror as they and their child perform a series of tasks, and parents practice specific responses to both desired and undesired behavior.

Parent Management Training (PMT)

In PMT, which is for children ages 3 to 13, parents are usually seen without the child present, although children may be asked to participate in some sessions. Skills to deal more effectively with challenging behaviors are taught and modeled by the therapist and then role-played with parents. After each session, parents are expected to practice the skills at home. Families usually participate in at least 10 sessions.

Since PMT is appropriate for all ages, it's a good choice when kids are too old for PCIT. It can also be a good option for families where the parent-child relationship is strong, but children might be struggling with things like anxiety, extreme impulsiveness or explosive anger.

Defiant Teens

Defiant Teens is for parents of teenagers who are 13-18 years old. The first half of this program involves only parents, and focuses on teaching more effective tools for interacting with their teenager, specifically for handling noncompliance or defiant behavior. But since teenagers are more autonomous than younger children and less influenced by their parents' guidance, the program also includes training for the adolescent to help him become a participant in changing the family dynamic.

In the second half, parents and teenagers are both trained in problem-solving communication. The aim is to provide family behavioral resources to help each family member develop more effective problem-solving, negotiation and communication skills and to correct any unreasonable beliefs that might be impeding their interactions.

Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)

Triple P's focus is on equipping parents with information and skills to increase confidence and self-sufficiency in managing child behavior. It can be utilized with a wide age range of children from toddlerhood through adolescence. With Triple P families can participate in different levels of intervention according to their needs. In some sessions clinicians will meet one-on-one with parents to discuss skills and strategies, and in some sessions kids will be included and the therapist will provide live coaching.

The Incredible Years

The Incredible Years offers small-group-based training for parents of kids from infants through age 12. The programs are broken into four age groups (baby, toddler, preschool and school age) and they range from 12 to 20 weeks.

The program starts with a focus on improving parent-child relationships and positive attachment before moving on to consistent routines, rules and limit-setting. Finally it covers child management strategies such as ignoring, redirection, logical and natural consequences, time to calm down and problem-solving.


For children from four to eight years old, Incredible Years offers children's groups that focus on helping them acquire emotion regulation strategies and social skills. Research shows that the kids' group works well at improving pro-social behavior and decreasing problem behaviors. Parents find that they learn not only from therapists but from other fellow parents in the group.

Medication

Parent training and behavior therapy are considered a more effective and longer lasting way to help children learn to manage their difficult emotions and rein in disruptive behavior. But medications are sometimes used as an adjunct to behavioral therapy. Anti-psychotic medications like Abilify (aripiprazole) and Risperdal (risperdone), which have been shown to reduce aggression and irritability, may be used in cases where a child is at risk of being removed from the school or home. Stimulant medication may be used if a child has excessive impulsivity, including those who have an ADHD diagnosis. Antidepressants (SSRIs) may be helpful if a child has underlying depression or anxiety.

It is important to talk with your doctor about any concerns you may have about your child's treatment plan, progress or any side effects that you may be seeing. A good clinician will be ready to discuss the symptoms you are seeing and explain potential options for changing dosage or medication. If you don't feel that your child's doctor is taking your concerns seriously, or your doctor is not following best practices for changing dosage, or adding new medications, you should get a second opinion.

If you believe your child should stop taking a particular medication, make sure you tell your doctor, and discuss the pros and cons. Don't make adjustments or withdraw the medication without consultation. Many medications should be reduced gradually, and children should be monitored for side effects of withdrawing too quickly.



If you don't feel that your child's doctor is taking your concerns seriously, you should get a second opinion.

Note about Risperdal

Risperdal can have serious side effects, including substantial weight gain and metabolic, neurological and hormonal changes that can be harmful. Children taking Risperdal or another atypical antipsychotic should be monitored by their doctors regularly over the course of treatment. Before treatment begins, they should be tested to establish baselines for height, weight, vital signs and levels of prolactin and blood fats and sugar. During the first few months of treatment, a child's levels should be measured frequently. If the child is using the medication long-term, he should continue to be monitored on a yearly basis.

Behavior Issues in School

For kids who struggle with their behavior in the classroom, establishing some school-specific behavior management strategies is important.

The first step is often asking the school to provide a functional behavior assessment. The goal of an FBA is to gather more information about when and why your child is acting out in class. This information is then used to come up with a plan for how to help. A school psychologist or behavioral specialist typically leads the FBA, and may speak to you, your child's teachers and your child as part of the assessment, as well as do some in-class observation.

Determining which specific things that your child struggles with is important. Just like in behavior management at home, it helps to get as much information as possible about the real-life situations that seem to lead to disruptive behavior, paying attention to what happens immediately before, during and after the behavior. Paying attention to when your child isn't acting out can also be informative.

Once this information has been gathered and analyzed, the school psychologist or behavioral specialist can work on creating a behavior intervention plan (or BIP) with ideas for preventing problem behaviors and rewarding positive behavior. This may include different teaching strategies, different consequences for misbehavior or changes to typical routines. Checking in periodically to monitor the effectiveness of these strategies (and make updates accordingly) is important.

How parents can support school behavior goals at home

Parents can also play a role in helping reinforce good behavior at school. You might tell your child's teacher that you want to be a partner in helping improve your child's behavior and select one or two goals at a time to work on, like turning in homework and not calling out in class, for example. Then you can ask the teacher to give you periodic reports on your child's progress. You don't want to overwhelm the teacher, but if you get a progress report every few days or every week then you can help reinforce the school's goals by either rewarding good school behavior at home or setting up appropriate consequences.

Parents Guide to Problem Behavior

For example, if you hear that your child is doing a good job turning in his assignments, you might give him some extra screen time that weekend in recognition of his efforts. If he's doing a particularly good job then you might give him a bigger reward, like an outing to his favorite restaurant. Conversely, if you get a report that he isn't doing his homework, you might let him know that he won't get any screen time for the first two days of the upcoming week because he needs to prioritize homework.

Additional Resources:

- childmind.org/parents-guide-getting-good-care
- childmind.org/behavior

For more information about working with schools on behavior issues, see our recommended reading list below.

Recommended Reading

Behavior Interventions at Home:

The Everyday Parenting Toolkit, by Alan Kazdin

The Kazdin Method for Parenting a Defiant Child,
by Alan Kazdin

Taking Charge of ADHD, by Russell Barkley

Behavior Interventions at School:

Behavioral Interventions in Schools: Evidence-Based Positive Strategies, by Angeleque Akin-little, Steven G. Little, Melissa A. Bray and Thomas J. Kehle

Managing ADHD in School: The Best Evidence-Based Methods for Teachers, by Russell Barkley



The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain, and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we're helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. We share all of our resources freely and do not accept any funding from the pharmaceutical industry. Learn more at childmind.org.