Behavioural disorders in children

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Behavioural disorders in children

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Summary

Some children have extremely difficult and challenging behaviours that are outside the norm for their age. These problems can result from temporary stressors in the child’s life, or they might represent more enduring disorders. The most common disruptive behaviour disorders include oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Boys are more likely than girls to suffer from behavioural disorders.

Treatment options include parent management training, cognitive behaviour therapy, medication and treatment for associated problems.

All young children can be naughty, defiant and impulsive from time to time, which is perfectly normal. However, some children have extremely difficult and challenging behaviours that are outside the norm for their age.

The most common disruptive behaviour disorders include oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These three behavioural disorders share some common symptoms, so diagnosis can be difficult and time consuming. A child or adolescent may have two disorders at the same time. Other exacerbating factors can include emotional problems, mood disorders, family difficulties and substance abuse.

Oppositional defiant disorder

Around one in ten children under the age of 12 years are thought to have oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), with boys outnumbering girls by two to one. Some of the typical behaviours of a child with ODD include:

- Easily angered, annoyed or irritated
- Frequent temper tantrums
- Argues frequently with adults, particularly the most familiar adults in their lives, such as parents
- Refuses to obey rules
- Seems to deliberately try to annoy or aggravate others
- Low self-esteem
- Low frustration threshold
- Seeks to blame others for any misfortunes or misdeeds.

Conduct disorder

Children with conduct disorder (CD) are often judged as ‘bad kids’ because of their delinquent behaviour and refusal to accept rules. Around five per cent of 10 year olds are thought to have CD, with boys outnumbering girls by four to one. Around one-third of children with CD also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Some of the typical behaviours of a child with CD may include:

- Frequent refusal to obey parents or other authority figures
- Repeated truancy
- Tendency to use drugs, including cigarettes and alcohol, at a very early age
- Lack of empathy for others
- Being aggressive to animals and other people or showing sadistic behaviours including bullying and physical or sexual abuse
- Keenness to start physical fights
- Using weapons in physical fights
- Frequent lying
- Criminal behaviour such as stealing, deliberately lighting fires, breaking into houses and vandalism
- A tendency to run away from home
- Suicidal tendencies – although these are more rare.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

Around two to five per cent of children are thought to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with boys outnumbering girls by three to one. The characteristics of ADHD can include:

- Inattention – difficulty concentrating, forgetting instructions, moving from one task to another without completing anything.
- Impulsivity – talking over the top of others, having a ‘short fuse’, being accident-prone.
- Overactivity – constant restlessness and fidgeting.

Risk factors in children’s behavioural disorders
The causes of ODD, CD and ADHD are unknown but some of the risk factors include:

- **Gender** – boys are much more likely than girls to suffer from behavioural disorders. It is unclear if the cause is genetic or linked to socialisation experiences.
- **Gestation and birth** – difficult pregnancies, premature birth and low birth weight may contribute to some cases of the child’s problem behaviour later in life.
- **Temperament** – children who are difficult to manage, temperamental or aggressive from an early age are more likely to develop behavioural disorders later in life.
- **Family life** – behavioural disorders are more likely in dysfunctional families. For example, a child is at increased risk in families where domestic violence, poverty, poor parenting skills or substance abuse is a problem.
- **Learning difficulties** – problems with reading and writing are often associated with behaviour problems.
- **Intellectual disabilities** – children with intellectual disabilities are twice as likely to have behavioural disorders.
- **Brain development** – studies have shown that areas of the brain that control attention appear to be less active in children with ADHD.

### Diagnosis of children’s behavioural disorders

Disruptive behavioural disorders are complicated and may include many different factors working in combination. For example, a child who exhibits the delinquent behaviours of CD may also have ADHD, anxiety, depression, and a difficult home life.

Diagnosis methods may include:

- Diagnosis by a specialist service, which may include a paediatrician, psychologist or child psychiatrist
- In-depth interviews with the parents, child and teachers
- Behaviour check lists or standardised questionnaires

A diagnosis is made if the child’s behaviour meets the criteria for disruptive behaviour disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from the American Psychiatric Association.

It is important to rule out acute stressors that might be disrupting the child’s behaviour. For example, a sick parent or victimising by other children might be responsible for sudden changes in a child’s typical behaviour and these factors have to be considered initially.

### Treatment of behavioural disorders in children

Untreated children with behavioural disorders may grow up to be dysfunctional adults. Generally, the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome is likely to be.

A large study in the United States, conducted for the National Institute of Mental Health and the Office of School Education Programs, showed that carefully designed medication management and behavioural treatment for ADHD improved all measures of behaviour in school and at home.

Treatment is usually multifaceted and depends on the particular disorder and factors contributing to it, but may include:

- **Parental education** – for example, teaching parents how to communicate with and manage their children.
- **Family therapy** – the entire family is helped to improve communication and problem-solving skills.
- **Cognitive behavioural therapy** – to help the child to control their thoughts and behaviour.
- **Social training** – the child is taught important social skills, such as how to have a conversation or play cooperatively with others.
- **Anger management** – the child is taught how to recognise the signs of their growing frustration and given a range of coping skills designed to defuse their anger and aggressive behaviour. Relaxation techniques and stress management skills are also taught.
- **Support for associated problems** – for example, a child with a learning difficulty will benefit from professional support.
- **Encouragement** – many children with behavioural disorders experience repeated failures at school and in their interactions with others. Encouraging the child to excel in their particular talents (such as sport) can help to build self-esteem.
- **Medication** – to help control impulsive behaviours.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor (for a referral to a specialist service below)
- Paediatrician
- Child psychologist
- Child psychiatrist
- The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne fact sheet on Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne fact sheets on Challenging behaviour in toddlers and young children, school-aged children and teenagers
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Association
- Australian Psychological Society, APS Psychologist Referral Service Tel. (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497

### References


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More information

Children (4-12)
Children basics

- **Children immunisation**
  - Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections...

- **Children and health services**
  - There is a range of subsidised and free health services, including services for mental health and dental health, available for children in Victoria...

- **Children – keeping them active**
  - A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body...

- **Eating tips for school children**
  - Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...

- **Growth charts for children**
  - Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...

- **Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need**
  - Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation...

- **Parenting services**
  - Parenting is one of the most important tasks we undertake but it doesn't always come naturally...

Growth and development

- **Child development (7) - three to four years**
  - Your child is starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but they can only practise these skills for a short time while feeling safe and happy...

- **Dyslexia**
  - Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty (SLD) in which the person has difficulties with language and words...

- **Growing pains**
  - Growing pains may cause a lot of pain but they are harmless and can respond to simple treatments...

- **Growth and development - primary school children**
  - Always see your doctor if you are concerned about your child's growth or weight...

- **Growth charts for children**
  - Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...

- **Growth hormone**
  - Some athletes and bodybuilders wrongly believe that taking synthetic growth hormone will help build up their muscles...

- **Immunisation history statements for children**
  - By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria...

- **Left-handedness**
  - If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand...
• Puberty
Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

• Teeth development in children
Teething symptoms are common in children and can be managed without medications.

Behaviour and learning

• 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry
Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves.

• 10 tips to prepare your child for high school
Visit the school before the school year starts.

• 10 tips to raise an optimistic child
Be a positive role model.

• A Healthy Start to School
A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

• Anxiety and fear in children
You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings.

• Behavioural disorders in children
Untreated behavioural disorders in children may mean they grow up to be dysfunctional adults.

• Bullying
Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions.

• Children and literacy
Your child is literate if they know how to speak, read and write their language with confidence.

• Children and shyness
If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist.

• Children and sibling rivalry
Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.

• Conduct disorder
Children with untreated conduct disorder are at increased risk of problems including substance use, personality disorders and mental illnesses.

• Cyberbullying (online bullying)
Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone.

• Discipline and children
Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control.

• Expressive language disorder
Expressive language disorder means that a child has difficulty with verbal, written or other information.

• Left-handedness
If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand.

• Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)
Oppositional defiant disorder is a childhood behavioural problem characterised by constant disobedience and hostility.

• Peer pressure
Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life.
Receptive language disorder
Receptive language disorder means the child has difficulties with understanding what is said to them.

Sleep - children and nightmares
Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often.

Young children and communication
Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise.

Healthy eating

- Body image and diets
  Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight.

- Breakfast
  Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2.

- Childcare and healthy eating
  Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children.

- Children's diet - fruit and vegetables
  If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead.

- Eating tips for preschoolers
  Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite.

- Eating tips for school children
  Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks.

- Food for sport - tucker talk tips
  Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes.

- Healthy eating - school lunches
  Simple ways to make your child's school lunch healthier.

- Healthy eating tips
  A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight.

- Lunch boxes - healthy ideas
  Healthy foods that are great for school lunch boxes.

- Lunch boxes - healthy shopping ideas (video)
  Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham takes us shopping for the right foods to include in your child's lunchbox.

- Lunch boxes - how to make them healthy (video)
  Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham shares three healthy and delicious lunchbox examples for the kids and provides some great food preparation tips to save you time throughout.

- Lunch boxes - menu planner
  By planning ahead, you can make sure that your child's lunch box has each of the six key elements of a healthy lunchbox.

- Lunch box tips
  Encourage children to help choose and prepare their own healthy snack or lunch.

- Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks - children
  Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drinks may cause health problems for children if consumed in large amounts.

- Sticking to New Year's resolutions
  New Year's resolutions and how to stick to them.

- Vegetarian diets and children
Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met.

**Keeping active**

- **Children – keeping them active**
  A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body.
- **Food for sport - tucker talk tips**
  Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes.
- **Gardening for children**
  Children can learn new skills, have fun and develop self-confidence when they grow their own plants.
- **Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips**
  Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older.
- **Parent's guide for active girls**
  Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.
- **Sport and children**
  Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together.
- **Sticking to New Year's resolutions**
  New Year's resolutions and how to stick to them.

**Managing weight**

- **Body mass index (BMI)**
  Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat.
- **Eating tips for school children**
  Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks.
- **Growth charts for children**
  Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'.
- **Obesity in children - causes**
  Once children are overweight, it takes a lot of effort for them to return to a healthy weight.
- **Obesity in children - management**
  If your child is overweight, you can help by making healthier lifestyle choices for yourself.
- **Overweight children - healthy lifestyle tips**
  You can help your child to develop healthy patterns for life and avoid obesity.
- **Parent's guide for active girls**
  Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.

**Care and wellbeing**

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.
- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.
- **Childhood immunisation**
  Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections.
- **Children and health services**
  There is a range of subsidised and free health services, including services for mental health and dental health, available for children in Victoria.
- **Child safety in the car**
Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries.

- Cyberbullying (online bullying)
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone.

- Dental checks for young children
  Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two.

- Immunisation history statements for children
  By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria.

- Immunisation in secondary schools
  Some immunisations are recommended for all Australian teenagers.

- Pain management (acute) - children
  If you think your child is in pain, always see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment.

Identity and relationships

- 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry
  Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves.

- A Healthy Start to School
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- Body image and diets
  Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight.

- Body image and young people - staying positive (video)
  The pressure on young girls and boys to be physically perfect is creating an epidemic of children and teenagers with low self-esteem and negative body image. Reporter Flip Shelton introduces us to the... 

- Body image – tips for parents
  Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.

- Bullying
  Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions.

- Children and shyness
  If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist.

- Children and sibling rivalry
  Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.

- Family violence and children
  Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems.

- Peer pressure
  Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life.

Health conditions and complaints

- Asthma explained
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

- Asthma in childhood - triggers (video)
  Parents and children talk about some of the factors that can cause a child's asthma to flare up.

- Asthma in children
Understanding asthma triggers for your child can help to reduce the risk of an asthma attack.

- **Back pain in children**
  Children with back pain may grow into adults with chronic bad backs, so it is important to encourage sensible back care.

- **Bedwetting**
  Bedwetting is a problem for many children and punishing them for it will only add to their distress.

- **Children and vomiting**
  Mild vomiting is normal in most babies and improves over time.

- **Constipation and children**
  A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children.

- **Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers**
  Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school.

- **Fever - children**
  Fever is a way in which the body fights infection. A fever is not dangerous and does not always indicate a serious illness.

- **Gastroenteritis in children**
  Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) and...

- **Head lice (nits)**
  No product can prevent head lice, but regular checks can help prevent the spread.

- **Immunisation history statements for children**
  By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria.

- **Obesity in children - management**
  If your child is overweight, you can help by making healthier lifestyle choices for yourself.

- **Pinworms**
  Despite the unsavoury reputation, a pinworm infection (worms) is relatively harmless and easily treated.

### Safety

- **Animals and child safety**
  Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets.

- **Bicycle safety and children**
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users.

- **Burns and scalds - children**
  Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom.

- **Child safety and injury prevention**
  By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child.

- **Child safety – at home**
  The best way to reduce the risk of injury to children is to remove a potentially dangerous item or add a safety product.

- **Child safety in the car**
  Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries.

- **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone.

- **Farm safety – children**
  Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers.
- **Hot weather and child safety**
  Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration.

- **Internet safety for children**
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints.

- **Mobile phone safety for children**
  Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying.

- **Playgrounds and child safety**
  Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity.

- **Poisoning and child safety**
  Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine.

- **Road and traffic safety for children**
  As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users.

- **Scooters and child safety**
  Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common.

- **Water safety for children**
  Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water.

### Grief and trauma

- **Child Protection Service**
  Child Protection provides child-centred, family-focused services to protect children from harm caused by abuse within the family.

- **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone.

- **Grief and children**
  It can be difficult to talk to a child about death, but it is important to be honest with them.

- **Grief – support services**
  People who have support from family and friends are less likely to suffer poor health after bereavement and loss.

- **Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services**
  Provides an overview of family support programs and health services available to refugees and asylum seekers living in Victoria.

- **Trauma and children - two to five years**
  Preschoolers may not have the words but will show their distress at traumatic events through changes in behaviour and functioning.

- **Trauma and primary school age children**
  Children look to their parents or carers to judge how to deal with a crisis.

- **Trauma and teenagers - tips for parents**
  Teenagers may turn to friends rather than parents for support in times of trauma and distress.

### Related Information

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **No Jab No Play**
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the
child is fully immunised for their age...

- **Asthma explained**
  
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...

- **Conduct disorder**
  
  Children with untreated conduct disorder are at increased risk of problems including substance use, personality disorders and mental illnesses...

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