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Understanding and Coping with Conduct Disorder

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(Texas Child Health Through Telemedicine)



What is Conduct Disorder?

- Conduct disorder is a severe condition characterized by hostile and sometimes physically violent behavior and a disregard for others. Children with CD exhibit cruelty, from early pushing, hitting and biting to, later, more than normal teasing and bullying, hurting animals, picking fights, theft, vandalism, and arson. Since childhood and adolescent conduct disorder often develops into the adult antisocial personality disorder, it should be addressed with treatment as early as possible; early treatment offers a child a better chance for considerable improvement and hope for a more successful future.



Symptoms of CD

- Symptoms of conduct disorder vary depending on the age of the child and whether the disorder is mild, moderate, or severe. In general, symptoms of conduct disorder fall into four general categories:
 - ✓ **Aggressive behavior** such as threaten or cause physical harm (fighting, bullying, being cruel to others or animals, using weapons, etc.)
 - ✓ **Destructive behavior** such as intentional destruction of property such as arson (deliberate fire-setting) and vandalism (harming another person's property).
 - ✓ **Deceitful behavior** such as lying, shoplifting, or breaking into homes or cars to steal.
 - ✓ **Violation of rules** such as going against social rules or engaging in behavior that is not appropriate for the person's age. These behaviors may include running away, skipping school, etc.
- In addition, many children with conduct disorder experience irritability, have low self-esteem, tend to throw frequent temper tantrums, abuse drugs and alcohol, and are unable to appreciate how their behavior can hurt others and generally have little guilt or remorse about hurting others.



Causes of CD

- The exact cause of conduct disorder is not known, but it is believed that a combination of biological, genetic, environmental, psychological, and social factors play a role.
- ✓ **Biological** such as brain injury and having other mental illnesses, such as ADHD, learning disorders, depression, substance abuse, or an anxiety disorder.
- ✓ **Genetics such as** having close family members with mental illnesses.
- ✓ **Environmental** such as a dysfunctional family dynamics, childhood abuse, traumatic experiences, a family history of substance abuse, and inconsistent discipline by parents.
- ✓ **Psychological** such as problems with moral awareness (notably, lack of guilt and remorse) and deficits in cognitive processing.
- ✓ **Social** such as low socioeconomic status and not being accepted by their peers.



Risk Factors

- Without treatment, your child is likely to have ongoing problems. Children may be unable to adapt to the demands of adulthood, which can cause problems with relationships, school, and holding a job. They are also at an increased risk for substance abuse and problems with law enforcement. Your child may even develop a personality disorder, such as antisocial personality disorder, when they reach adulthood. This is why early diagnosis and treatment are critical.



Diagnosis

- If symptoms of conduct disorder are present, the doctor may conduct complete medical and psychiatric evaluation. A physical exam and blood work may be appropriate if there is concern that a physical illness might be causing the symptoms. The doctor will also look for signs of other disorders that often occur along with conduct disorder, such as ADHD and depression.
- If a physical cause for the symptoms cannot be found, referral to a psychiatrist or a mental health professional who is trained to diagnose and treat mental illnesses in children and teens may be appropriate. Mental health professionals use different assessment tools to evaluate a child for a mental disorder. The diagnosis is based on reports of the child's symptoms, observation of the child's attitudes and behavior, reports from the child's parents, teachers, and other adults because children may withhold information or otherwise have trouble explaining their problems or understanding their symptoms.



Treatment

- Treatment for conduct disorder is based on many factors, including the child's age, the severity of symptoms, as well as the child's ability to participate in and tolerate specific therapies. Treatment usually consists of a combination of therapy and medication.
- **Therapy** that is aimed at helping the child learn to express and control anger in more appropriate ways. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) aims to reshape the child's thinking (cognition) to improve problem solving skills, anger management, moral reasoning skills, and impulse control. Family therapy may be used to help improve family interactions and communication among family members.
- **Medication** although there is no medication formally approved to treat conduct disorder, various medications may be used to treat some of its distressing symptoms (impulsivity, aggression), as well as any other mental illnesses that may be present, such as ADHD or depression.



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Questions