

# A Caregiver's Guide to Conduct Disorders

*Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself.*

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES



Conduct Disorders are one of the most frequently seen mental disorders that occur in adolescents.<sup>1</sup> It can be easily confused with juvenile delinquency or rebellious behavior. Often times, young people with conduct disorders have other issues that have not yet been identified, such as depression or ADHD. Conduct Disorders can cause serious disruptions to family dynamics and are often due to the overall structure of the family. Treatment is encouraged and can help both the adolescent and family understand the effects that the child's behavior has on others. The following guide discusses what conduct disorders are and what it can look like in different children; what you can expect from therapy and treatment; and what you can do to assist in your child's progress.

## What are Conduct Disorders?

Conduct disorders are when children behave in a way that does not line up with the rules and norms of the current society.<sup>1</sup> A child must demonstrate at least three of the following behaviors over six months in order to be evaluated for conduct disorder:

- Stealing or constant lying
- Deliberately setting fires
- Skipping school or running away from home
- Breaking into homes, offices, or cars
- Deliberately destroying property
- Displaying physical cruelty to animals or humans
- Forcing others into sexual activity
- Often starting fights or using weapons in fights

Many children with conduct disorders may also have other conditions such as: mood disorders, anxiety, ADHD, learning problems, substance abuse, among others.<sup>2</sup>

## What does the future hold?

There is help for children with conduct disorders. A child who exhibits behaviors described above will benefit from early intervention and consistent treatment especially if there are other issues such as depression and ADHD. Treatment attendance is very important because active participation in effective treatment can diminish conduct disorder symptoms.<sup>3</sup>



## Treatment for Conduct Disorders

Professional treatment is essential for children with conduct disorders but may be extremely difficult. Treatment typically comes in the form of psychotherapy or counseling and occasionally medication if ADHD is also present. Treatment is necessary for both the individual child and individual caregiver.

Depending on the current situation, school staff, legal teams and others may be included in the treatment plan. Typical treatments and techniques include:<sup>2</sup>

- Teaching you and your child about conduct disorders and how his or her behaviors affect others.
- Talking about the way your child thinks about him or herself and how that makes him or her feel. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist may be able to help change them and help your child feel and act differently.
- Setting small goals in order to track progress and behaviors.

- Encouraging your child to pay attention to his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior and to connect those to depressed feelings.
- Talking about whom your child feels close to and the different relationships in his or her life and encouraging positive communication with others.
- Monitoring of behaviors and being more aware of reactions to certain situations.
- Praise, rewards and reinforcement of positive behaviors.
- Use of timeouts, commands and behavioral contracting depending on age and development level.
- Managing anger and other feelings of hostility or irritability.
- Discussing your child's talents or working on improving on old and new skills that they have.

Be sure to speak to your child's clinician or psychiatrist to receive more detailed information on the type of therapy he/she is using with your child and/or family.



## How can you help?

Caregivers often want to know how they can help improve their child's progress. The following section includes tips that other caregivers have found helpful. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your family but it may be helpful to give a few of these a try.<sup>2,4</sup>

- **Education.** Stay educated on what conduct disorders are, what it looks like, how it is affecting you, your child and your family. Encourage your child to be open on treatment and to educate themselves on how their behavior is affecting others.
- **Get involved in therapy.** Often caregivers will actively participate with the clinician in a treatment plan for their child. Be open and flexible to meeting for treatment. Make time for both you and your child to participate individually and as a family.
- **Creating support systems.** Make sure everyone who lives in your home is informed on what is going on in order to create a strong family support for your child. Find people that you trust and can confide in to help you with transportation to appointments, take care of other family members and for emotional support as well.
- **Stay involved with school.** Conduct disorders can directly affect your child's progress in school and often start with his or her behavior in school. Communicate constantly with school staff to monitor what is going on with your child when you are not around. Encourage regular attendance and help with homework if necessary.
- **Take care of yourself.** Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services and seek professional help if you think it would be helpful. You are your child's source of support and comfort so feeling your best will help your child to feel his or her best!
- **Don't place blame.** Blaming yourself, your child or anyone else will not help the situation. Be supportive in any way possible and don't feel guilty about what your child is going through.
- **Discipline.** Don't be afraid to discipline your child if necessary. Use of time outs, commands and behavioral contracting is effective in your child's progress.
- **Problem Solving.** Use rewards and reinforcement of positive behaviors with your child. Encourage communication and relationship building with others. Assist with monitoring behavior and problem solving techniques that you learn from your child's clinician.
- **Develop routines and structures.** Changes in routine are inevitable if your child begins treatment of any kind. Do your best to stay organized with appointments, medication, work, and social plans with friends and family. Creating structure for your child will help them to stay on track with a daily routine.
- **Reduce stress.** You may laugh at this one, but it is true. The less stress you have in your life, the better off everyone will be. Continue doing things you love and be sure to stay healthy (exercise and eat healthy foods).
- **Be proud of yourself.** This is a difficult time. You are already on the right path just by staying informed and involved in your child's life!

## Resources and Citations

- 1 Children: Children's Mental Health. (2012). American Psychiatric Association. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from [psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/children](http://psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/children)
- 2 Conduct Disorder. (2012). American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from [aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/Facts\\_for\\_Families\\_Pages/Conduct\\_Disorder\\_33.aspx](http://aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Conduct_Disorder_33.aspx)
- 3 Frequently Asked Questions. (2014). American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Retrieved on January 18, 2015 from [aacap.org/aacap/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Resource\\_Centers/Conduct\\_Disorder\\_Resource\\_Center/FAQ.aspx](http://aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Conduct_Disorder_Resource_Center/FAQ.aspx)
- 4 Taking Care of You: Self-Care for Family Caregivers. Family Caregiver Alliance. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from [caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content\\_node.jsp?nodeid=847](http://caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=847)