

# Challenging Behaviours





## Challenging Behaviours

Almost all children will be difficult or demanding at times, especially toddlers. Challenging or disruptive behaviours are those that persist or become so severe that they cause major problems for families or communities.

Excessively disruptive or aggressive behaviour at any age should be taken seriously. It should not be dismissed as a 'phase' or something they will 'grow out of'. Such behaviour in children and adolescents may begin with frequent loss of temper, irritability, impulsive behaviour, or becoming easily frustrated.

When a parent or other adult in frequent contact with the child is concerned about the child's behaviour, professional advice should be sought. Health professionals, including counsellors, can help parents identify problems and ways to help their child cope with difficulties.

Aggressive behaviour may include:

- explosive temper tantrums
- physical aggression
- fighting, threats or attempts to hurt others
- use of weapons
- cruelty towards family pets or other animals
- intentional destruction of property, or
- vandalism.

Discipline should be about learning and should not be harsh or unfair. Physical punishment will often make children's behaviour even more difficult. Seeing or hearing domestic violence can affect children and adolescents as much as being assaulted. Violent television or video games may also affect vulnerable young children. Violence often leads to violence.

## **Tantrums**

Tantrums happen when children feel frustrated or stressed. Occasional tantrums are a normal stage of development in young children. Parents should be concerned if tantrums become extreme or constant.

### **Some things parents can do to help children get over tantrums are:**

- spend regular and relaxed time with them
- let them know you notice the good things they do, and
- consider other stresses affecting the child such as starting childcare, a new baby in the family or parents arguing.

Behavioural problems may affect a child or adolescent's ability to solve problems, cope with life stresses and enjoy normal activities with their family and friends. Their schooling may also be disrupted. Disruptive behaviour can make it difficult for children to form friendships and can interfere with family relationships. Without treatment, children and young people may go on to have problems at school, with the law, in employment and in bringing up families of their own.

## **What is ADHD?**

Very young children have short attention spans and act impulsively, but this usually improves with age. If these problems are severe or persistent, they may be due to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Children affected by ADHD often have problems paying attention to instructions, finishing tasks, relating to others and staying settled.

If the following signs are present in your child for more than six months, professional advice should be sought:

- easily distracted by their surroundings or other thoughts
- inability to focus on any activity for long
- over-activity, unable to keep still or stop talking, or
- impulsively acting without thought to the consequences.

Such children may have difficulty making friends, have problems at school and be wrongly labelled as a 'bad person'. If you think your child needs help, don't hesitate to seek professional advice.

## Coping with challenging behaviours

No matter how your children may behave, they need to know that you will not harm or leave them. Children need to know that their parent(s) can help them to manage their feelings.

Try and work out what the major stresses are and do something about them. Teach your child that feelings can be managed and expressed in helpful ways.

Your child may need help to cope with day-to-day problems with family, friends and school. Early treatment for behaviour problems can help a child to:

- learn how to control their behaviour
- learn how to express anger and frustration in non-harmful ways
- be responsible for their actions, and
- accept the consequences of their actions.

Various parenting programs are run in each State and Territory around Australia. These can provide information and counselling to increase parenting skills and satisfaction, and promote family harmony. These programs can also show parents how to manage their children's behaviour in constructive ways.

For information about what programs and other help is available in your area contact your local Area Health Service.

## Where to get help

- your general practitioner
- your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services, and
- other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians, child psychologists and school counsellors.

Additional copies of this brochure are available from the Mental Health and Special Programs Branch, Department of Health and Aged Care by calling 1800 066 247 or faxing 1800 634 400. Website: [www.mentalhealth.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au)

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