



Parent-Child

RESEARCH CLINIC

Tip Sheet: Conduct Problems in Children

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Child misbehaviour can be a normal aspect of development and can be a child's way of testing boundaries and learning consequences. However, if a child is displaying temper tantrums, disobedience, anger and irritability, or aggression more days than not, this can impact their social development, educational opportunities, parental stress, and wider family functioning. If this is the case, professional intervention may be needed and the earlier help is sought, the easier it can be to change these behavioural patterns.

Although it is well-established that for young children, parent-training interventions are the gold-standard for behaviour management, the specific type of intervention that is most likely to be effective can differ for each child. Thorough assessment is required to determine the reasons why child conduct problems begin and continue, in particular, whether there are any specific skill deficits present or family-functioning factors that may become a barrier to standard parent-training interventions.

It is now widely recognised that a specific subset of children with conduct problems exhibit limited prosocial emotions – shallow affect, deficient empathy, poor motivation to perform well, and an unresponsiveness to punishment. This subset of children tends to develop more severe behaviour problems and typically do not respond as well as others to standard parent-training interventions. Researchers are currently developing modified and adjunctive interventions tailored for these children with a focus on increasing warmth in the parent-child relationship and developing the child's emotional understanding and empathy in an effort to increase prosocial behaviour and emotional responsiveness.

Causes of Child Misbehaviour

There are a variety of things that can contribute to the way children behave, but the three major factors are:

- Biology**
 Genes and biology influence our temperament and can explain why two children who get the same kind of parenting can behave very differently and respond very differently to parenting strategies.
- Discipline and encouragement**
 The way we reward behaviour (including accidentally rewarding misbehaviour), pay less attention to positive behaviours, use strategies that don't work and give unclear instructions all influence child behaviour.
- Family stress**
 Parents often underestimate the impact of factors like marital problems, work stress, financial problems, parental mental health problems, or lack of social support on their children. It is important that parents feel supported to be able to work as a team, feel in control and enjoy family life in order to effectively manage child behaviour.

For some children, misbehaviour may stem from specific anxieties, underlying developmental deficits such as language delay, or as a result of exposure to trauma. It is important that a thorough assessment be conducted to determine if this is the case, and if so, intervention would need to be tailored accordingly.



The Parent-Child Relationship

A strong parent-child relationship is key to the effective use of discipline strategies. If a child is constantly being corrected or punished for misbehaviour, they may not receive enough positive input and this can become a negative cycle within the parent-child relationship. It is important for children to have positive attention and quality time spent with parents to ensure that they develop a strong, secure attachment so that when we implement rules and boundaries for their behaviour, they do not feel that their attachment is threatened.



When Should a Family Be Referred for Intervention?

If the child is exhibiting behaviour problems that are significantly affecting their social development, parent's stress levels, family functioning, or educational opportunities, it is important that the child and family be assessed by a Clinical Psychologist to determine whether specific intervention may be needed.

It is common for conduct problems to be present at home, but not at school. Although this can indicate reduced severity of behaviour difficulties, early intervention is recommended to prevent problems getting worse.