

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Even the best-behaved children occasionally can be defiant, disruptive or act out. Anger is a normal, healthy emotion that can at times be difficult for children to express. A common trigger can be frustration when a child cannot get what he or she wants or is asked to do something they might not feel like doing. These behaviors may be more common in a child who has a temperament that is strong willed and emotionally charged. Additionally, some kids may just have a lower tolerance for frustration. While there are many factors that can contribute to a child acting out in anger, distinguishing the difference between normal behavior and unhealthy behavior in children can be challenging. When behaviors become persistent and interfere in a child's ability to function in daily activities and tasks, a more serious underlying issue may be present. Kids and teens who display a pattern of tantrums, arguing and angry or disruptive behavior toward teachers, parents or other authority figures may have oppositional defiant disorder (ODD).

Behaviors associated with ODD can be mild, moderate or severe and may include:

- Being argumentative and defiant
- Hostility towards authority figures
- Frequently losing their temper
- Blaming others for mistakes
- Being vindictive
- Being unusually angry and irritable
- Deliberately annoying others
- Uncooperative and/or refusing to follow rules

According to the CDC, most commonly, ODD signs arise before age 8, sometimes later, but most often before the teen years. The difference between normal oppositional behavior and ODD is how severe it is and how long it has been present. For example, a child with ODD will have had extreme behavior issues for at least six months. According to the Child Mind Institute, another common factor of ODD is the weight it can put on family relationships. The extreme behaviors of ODD can make parenting especially difficult, resulting in a strained parent-child relationship.

As a means to connect children and parents to appropriate supports, a child who displays symptoms of ODD should have a comprehensive evaluation completed by a trained mental health professional. Treatment for ODD most often involves a variety of therapeutic interventions, training in positive relationship building and sometimes medication to treat related mental health conditions. For example, a child with ODD may also have other mental health conditions such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety or depression. If other mental health conditions are left untreated, it may impact the severity of ODD.

The following tips for parents and teachers can serve as a guide to better support a child with ODD at home and at school.

For Parents:

- Build on the positives- provide praise and positive reinforcement when your child shows flexibility and cooperation.
- Pick your battles- a child with ODD has trouble avoiding power struggles, so prioritize what you want your child to do.
- Set reasonable, age appropriate limits with consequences that can be consistently reinforced.
- Give yourself “time-outs” if you need a break- this also models for your child that a time-out can be a healthy coping skill to avoid overreacting.
- Seek the support from other adults (teachers, coaches, family and friends).
- Work with a mental health professional who can assist you in positive parenting strategies. Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) can help improve the parent-child relationship.
- Practice Self-Care as a means to manage your own stress.

For Teachers:

- Post classroom rules and review them regularly.
- Use a behavior tracking and reward system- allow them to set goals and decide together what the consequences will be if they don’t meet the goal.
- Praise positive behaviors.
- Have a plan in place to handle serious behavior problems.
- Give the student a safe place to “re-set”- kids with ODD can learn to recognize when they are feeling overwhelmed and getting ready to challenge. Giving them a safe space to calm down and rethink their choices can be helpful.
- Give choices- this can give the student a feeling of control.
- Make personal connections- build a positive relationship with the student by finding out what they are interested in and having conversations on their level during breaks.

For many children, with the right level of supports and intervention, ODD does improve over time. It should be noted that there is not a one-size fits all model of treatment for children with ODD. A treatment plan that is individualized to the needs of each child and family leads to more effective outcomes.

References: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Mind Institute; Mayo Clinic; Yale Medicine