

Behavior Challenges



What are behavior challenges ?

All children and teens get angry or frustrated at times. Some youth experience anger, frustration, or irritability more frequently and have difficulty calming down. Behavior challenges may look like increased defiance (e.g., not following directions), severe irritability, dysregulated anger (e.g., frequent temper tantrums), or, in some instances, aggression. These behaviors can make it difficult to do daily activities at home or at school.

It is important to note that behavior challenges can be a symptom of many other disorders (e.g., ADHD, anxiety, depression, autism), and understanding what causes the behaviors is important.



What does treatment look like?



Challenging behaviors are treatable. Treatment usually focuses on addressing the underlying condition.

- Some children with anxiety will have meltdowns or difficulty with changes in routine.
- Some kids can be more irritable when depressed. Some have emotional dysregulation and impulsivity related to ADHD, which could lead to aggression.
- Some children become aggressive when they feel overstimulated or have a change in routine.
- Being hungry or tired can increase challenging behaviors or cause irritability.
- It's important to make sure that aggression isn't caused by pain or discomfort in children who have difficulty communicating their needs.



Therapy for disruptive behavior and aggression for younger children usually focuses on **Behavioral Parent Training (BPT)**, which is a type of talk therapy for caregivers to learn skills to manage their child's behavior at home. BPT approaches usually aim to increase positive responses for appropriate behavior and use consistent and predictable boundaries or consequences. For teens, **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** is often recommended, which is a type of talking therapy that explores how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related.

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Therapists are often mental health clinicians (like a psychologist, social worker, or counselor). The therapist may meet with your child alone or with the parent present depending on the child's age. Parents are typically a big part of treatment for young children. Treatment typically lasts several months with weekly sessions.



Medication for aggression would be based on what is likely driving it or the underlying condition.



What can I do?

FOR PARENTS:

- Caregivers often feel frustrated or overwhelmed when their child does not listen or is being disruptive. Try to **stay calm** and approach your child with a neutral voice.
- When setting a boundary, it is typical for a child to escalate their behavior before calming down. It is important to **keep your boundary**. If a parent gives in when a child is escalating their behavior (e.g., yelling louder), this may accidentally make the behaviors worse over time. Only set boundaries you know you can stick with.
- Praise appropriate behaviors.** Try to catch your child being good and give them specific praises (e.g., "Good job helping me clean up!" or "I like when you use your words to tell me how you feel").

FOR TEENS:

- It is normal to feel angry and frustrated. Try to **notice** times when you are getting angry, frustrated, irritable, or aggressive and what is causing these feelings.
- Identify your **coping strategies** to help you calm down when you are feeling frustrated or angry (like doing a calming activity, taking deep breaths, or walking away from situation).
- After you feel calmer, have a **conversation** with the person you were frustrated with to see if there are ways you can find a solution together.



How do I get help?

If you need more help, talk to your primary care provider or get support from a mental health provider. To find a mental health provider, call the phone number on the back of your child's insurance card and ask for a list of covered mental health providers in your area. You can also search for providers on your insurance company's website. For support finding resources for housing, food, and more, visit the [Children's National Hospital Community Resources website](#).

- Scan here for more information about how to find a mental health provider and how to get help in a crisis.



Pediatric **Health** Network

