

BEHAVIOR ISSUES IN CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

It's easy to know when your child has a fever. A child's emotional problems may be harder to identify, but you can learn to recognize the symptoms. Pay attention to excessive anger, fear, sadness or anxiety. Sudden changes in your child's behavior can tip you off to a problem. So can behaviors like exercising too much, or hurting or destroying things.

Mental health problems can disrupt daily life at home, at school or in the community. Without help, mental health problems can lead to school failure, alcohol or drug abuse, family discord, and violence. However, help is available. Talk to your health care provider if you have concerns about your child's behavior.

MISBEHAVIOR

With behavior disorders, your child or teen has a pattern of hostile, aggressive or disruptive behaviors for more than 6 months. Poor choices can become habits

Warning signs can include

- Harming or threatening themselves, other people or pets
- Damaging or destroying property
- Lying
- Not doing well in school, skipping school
- Early smoking, drinking or drug use
- Frequent tantrums and arguments
- Consistent hostility towards authority figures

Parents often have difficulty telling the difference between variations in normal behavior and true behavioral problems. In reality, the difference between normal and abnormal behavior is not always clear; usually it is a matter of degree or expectation. A fine line often divides normal from abnormal behavior, in part because what is "normal" depends upon the child's level of development, which can vary greatly among children of the same age.

Development can be uneven, too, with a child's social development lagging behind his intellectual growth, or vice versa. In addition, "normal" behavior is in part determined by the context in which it occurs - that is, by the particular situation and time, as well as by the child's own particular family values and expectations, and cultural and social background.

Understanding your child's unique developmental progress is necessary in order to interpret, accept or adapt his behavior (as well as your own). Remember, children have great individual variations of temperament, development and behavior.

TYPES OF BEHAVIOR

1. Some kinds of behavior are wanted and approved. They might include doing homework, being polite, and doing chores. These actions receive compliments freely and easily.
2. Other behavior is not sanctioned but is tolerated under certain conditions, such as during times of illness (of a parent or a child) or stress (a move, for instance, or the birth of a new sibling). These kinds of behavior might include not doing chores, regressive behavior (such as baby talk), or being excessively self-centered.
3. Still other kinds of behavior cannot and should not be tolerated or reinforced. They include actions that are harmful to the physical, emotional, or social well-being of the child, the family members, and others. They may interfere with the child's intellectual development. They may be forbidden by law, ethics, religion, or social mores. They might include very aggressive or destructive behavior, overt racism or prejudice, stealing, smoking or substance abuse, school failure, or an intense sibling rivalry.

PARENTS ROLE

Your own parental responses are guided by whether you see the behavior as a problem. Frequently, parents over interpret or overreact to a minor, normal short-term change in behavior. At the other extreme, they may ignore or downplay a serious problem. They also may seek quick, simple answers to what are, in fact, complex problems. All of these responses may create difficulties or prolong the time for a resolution.

The parents' own temperament, usual mood, and daily pressures will also influence how they interpret the child's behavior. Easygoing parents may accept a wider range of behavior as normal and be slower to label something a problem, while parents who are by nature more stern move more quickly to discipline their children. Parents usually differ from one another in their own backgrounds and personal preferences, resulting in differing parenting styles that will influence a child's behavior and development.