



Managing Disruptive or Aggressive Behaviors: Tips for Families

What are disruptive or aggressive behaviors?

Disruptive behavior is any behavior causing a problem for others.

Aggressive behavior is behavior that may cause harm to another person.

Examples of disruptive or aggressive behaviors include

- Not following school or family rules
- Having tantrums or getting very angry
- Fighting, teasing, or bullying others
- Stealing or damaging property

It's normal for children of any age to get angry or break a rule once in a while. But if your child's behaviors are causing problems at home, at school, or with friends, they may need extra support.

The good news is there are things you can do to help your child manage their behavior and succeed at home and school.

How can I help my child at home?

These tips are helpful for all children, but they can be especially helpful for children with disruptive or aggressive behaviors. Parenting is a busy job, so use your judgment about which tips make the most sense for your family.

Connect with your child

- **Set aside one-on-one time every day without TV or other media.** It's important to spend quality time together, even if your child is showing a lot of behavior problems that day.
- **Ask your child about their life** and let them know they can tell you about concerns, fears, and worries. If they seem upset, you could ask, "Did anything happen today that you'd like to talk about?"
- **Praise your child** for dealing with difficult emotions in a healthy way. For example, "I know it was hard when your team lost. I'm proud of you for staying calm and congratulating the other team."

Use positive parenting

- **Explain rules in a positive way** and describe the behavior you want. For example, instead of saying, "Don't run," you could say, "Please walk slowly."
- **Reward positive behavior.** Spending time doing a fun activity with a parent is a very powerful reward.
- **Pay less attention to negative behavior.** Over time, your child will learn that acting out isn't a good way to get your attention.
- **Set up a token system** where children "earn" tokens (for example, marbles or stickers) for positive behavior. Earning a certain number of tokens means your child gets a privilege or treat, such as extra time doing something they enjoy.
- **Try a parenting class** to learn and practice positive parenting techniques. This can also be a great way to connect with other parents.

Knowing what to expect can help your child feel safe and secure.

Try to follow a regular schedule for playtime, mealtime, and bedtime. It's important for rules and consequences to be the same all the time too. Be sure everyone who takes care of your child is on the same page.

Set consequences that make sense

- **Make consequences age appropriate.** For young children, it's best if consequences happen right away, so your child can connect the consequence to what they did.
- **Help your child understand,** but avoid getting into an explanation right away. Later on, when everyone is calm, you can talk about what happened.
- **Have your child practice a positive behavior.** For example, if they made a mess during a tantrum, they could help clean up afterward.
- **Make sure consequences come immediately after the event,** and avoid delaying them. Be willing to enforce the consequence, even in public.



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How can I help my child at home? (continued)

Set your child up for success

- **Pick your battles.** Decide which behaviors are the most important and focus on those.
- **Learn to anticipate challenging situations.** Try to limit the time you spend in situations that are very hard for your child.
- **Encourage your child to spend time with friends** who have a positive influence on your child's behavior.

Plan for safety

- Work with your child's doctor or therapist to make a list of numbers to call if your child's behavior is threatening your child's safety or someone else's.
- Remove weapons from your home or keep them in an approved lockbox. Separate ammunition (bullets) from guns.
- Pay attention to what upsets your child, so you can be prepared and help them manage their feelings.

Build healthy habits

- Encourage your child to be **physically active** for at least an hour every day.
- **Eat healthy** meals every day, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and protein foods.
- Help your child **get enough sleep.** This means 10 to 13 hours a day (including naps) for preschoolers, 9 to 12 hours for school-aged kids, and 8 to 10 hours for teens.
- **Limit entertainment screen time** to less than 2 hours a day. Avoid scary or violent TV shows, video games, and movies.

How can I help my child at school?

Some children act differently at home than they do at school. It's important to talk with your child's teacher regularly so you know what's going on at school.

If your child is having a hard time at school, you can

- Ask what strategies the teacher is using to help your child control their behavior.

- Let the teacher know what strategies have worked well at home.
- Ask the school to test your child for learning problems or other special education needs.

When do I need to go back to the doctor?

If your child's disruptive or aggressive behaviors continue or get worse, get back in touch with the doctor. The doctor can help you decide whether visiting a specialist is a good idea. Anger control therapy, cognitive behavior therapy, and family therapy are some treatments that may help.

Call the doctor right away if your child is hurting other children or animals, your child gets in trouble with the police, or the behavior makes you so angry and frustrated that you can't find anything positive about your child or think you might hurt them.

Make time to care for yourself too.

Parenting can be stressful. If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't be afraid to ask for support from family, close friends, social services, or your faith community. Children pick up on the stress and worries of adults, so getting support for yourself can help your child too.

To learn more about disruptive and aggressive behaviors and what you can do to help your child, visit these websites.

- American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org: www.HealthyChildren.org
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
- National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health: www.ffcmh.org
- Triple P – Positive Parenting Program: www.triplep-parenting.net



More resources about disruptive or aggressive behaviors

This space is for you to write notes about other helpful resources you have found for disruptive or aggressive behaviors.

