

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) in Children

What is oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) in children?

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is a type of behaviour disorder. It is mostly diagnosed in childhood. Children with ODD are uncooperative, defiant, and hostile toward peers, parents, teachers, and other authority figures. They are more troubling to others than they are to themselves.

What causes ODD in a child?

Researchers don't know what causes ODD. But there are 2 main theories for why it occurs:

- **Developmental theory.** This theory suggests that the problems start when children are toddlers. Children and teens with ODD may have had trouble learning to become independent from a parent or other main person to whom they were emotionally attached. Their behaviour may be normal developmental issues that are lasting beyond the toddler years.
- **Learning theory.** This theory suggests that the negative symptoms of ODD are learned attitudes. They mirror the effects of negative reinforcement methods used by parents and others in power. The use of negative reinforcement increases the child's ODD behaviours. That's because these behaviours allow the child to get what he or she wants: attention and reaction from parents or others.

Which children are at risk for ODD?

ODD is more common in boys than in girls. Children with the following mental health problems are also more likely to have ODD:

- Mood or anxiety disorders
- Conduct disorder
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

What are the symptoms of ODD in a child?

Most symptoms seen in children and teens with ODD also happen at times in other children without it. This is especially true for children around ages 2 or 3, or during the teen years. Many children tend to disobey, argue with parents, or defy authority. They may often behave this way when they are tired, hungry, or upset. But in children and teens with ODD, these symptoms happen more often. They also interfere with learning and school adjustment. And in some cases, they disrupt the child's relationships with others.

Symptoms of ODD may include:

- Having frequent temper tantrums
- Arguing a lot with adults
- Refusing to do what an adult asks
- Always questioning rules and refusing to follow rules
- Doing things to annoy or upset others, including adults
- Blaming others for the child's own misbehaviours or mistakes
- Being easily annoyed by others
- Often having an angry attitude
- Speaking harshly or unkindly

- Seeking revenge or being vindictive

These symptoms may look like other mental health problems. Make sure your child sees his or her healthcare provider for a diagnosis.

How is ODD diagnosed in a child?

If you notice symptoms of ODD in your child or teen, you can help by seeking a diagnosis right away. Early treatment can often prevent future problems.

A child psychiatrist or qualified mental health expert can diagnose ODD. He or she will talk with the parents and teachers about the child's behaviour and may observe the child. In some cases, your child may need mental health testing.

How is ODD treated in a child?

Early treatment can often prevent future problems. Treatment will depend on your child's symptoms, age, and health. It will also depend on how bad the ODD is.

Children with ODD may need to try different therapists and types of therapies before they find what works for them. Treatment may include:

- **Cognitive-behavioural therapy.** A child learns to better solve problems and communicate. He or she also learns how to control impulses and anger.
- **Family therapy.** This therapy helps make changes in the family. It improves communication skills and family interactions. Having a child with ODD can be very hard for parents. It can also cause problems for siblings. Parents and siblings need support and understanding.
- **Peer group therapy.** A child develops better social and interpersonal skills.
- **Medicines.** These are not often used to treat ODD. But a child may need them for other symptoms or disorders, such as ADHD.

How can I help prevent ODD in my child?

Researchers don't know what causes ODD. But certain approaches can help prevent the disorder. Young children be helped by early intervention programs that teach them social skills and how to deal with anger. For teens, talk therapy (psychotherapy), learning social skills, and getting help with schoolwork can all help reduce problem behaviours. School-based programs can also help to stop bullying and improve relationships among teens.

Parent-management training programs are also important. These programs teach parents how to manage their child's behaviour. Parents learn positive reinforcement methods, and also how to discipline their child.

How can I help my child live with ODD?

Early treatment for your child can often prevent future problems. Here are things you can do to help:

- Keep all appointments with your child's healthcare provider.
- Take part in family therapy as needed.
- Talk with your child's healthcare provider about other providers who will be involved in your child's care. Your child may get care from a team that may include counselors, therapists, social workers,

psychologists, and psychiatrists. Your child's care team will depend on his or her needs and how serious the disorder is.

- Tell others about your child's conduct disorder. Work with your child's healthcare provider and school to develop a treatment plan.
- Reach out for support. Being in touch with other parents who have a child with ODD may be helpful. If you feel overwhelmed or stressed out, talk with your child's healthcare provider. He or she may direct you to a support group for caregivers of children with ODD.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call your child's healthcare provider right away if your child:

- Feels extreme depression, fear, anxiety, or anger toward him or herself or others
- Feels out of control
- Hears voices that others don't hear
- Sees things that others don't see
- Can't sleep or eat for 3 days in a row
- Shows behaviour that concerns friends, family, or teachers, and others express concern about this behaviour and ask you to seek help

Key points about ODD in children

- Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is a type of behaviour disorder. Children with ODD are uncooperative, defiant, and hostile toward peers, parents, teachers, and other authority figures.
- Developmental problems may cause ODD. Or the behaviours may be learned.
- A child with ODD may argue a lot with adults or refuse to do what they ask. He or she may also be unkind to others.
- A mental health expert often diagnoses ODD.
- Therapy that helps the child interact better with others is the main treatment. Medicines may be needed for other problems, such as ADHD.

Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your child's healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for the visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your provider gives you for your child.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed and how it will help your child. Also know what the side effects are.
- Ask if your child's condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if your child does not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If your child has a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your child's provider after office hours. This is important if your child becomes ill and you have questions or need advice.