

Aggressive or Defiant Behavior

Many children have aggressive behavior or defy rules. Sometimes, it can be challenging to tell the difference between normal and problem behavior.

Aggression that is part of normal behavior is short lived and does not cause significant or persistent interference with day-to-day function.

Biting in toddlers and preschoolers is a common aggressive behavior that can be handled with distraction and redirection. The adult makes a simple statement “No Biting” and is careful not to reinforce the behavior by giving attention to the biting child. Children should never be bitten back. The adults must praise appropriate behaviors often and monitor for cues before biting to prevent and interrupt the behavior whenever possible.

For some children, aggressive or defiant behaviors are long lasting or get worse with time.

Oppositional defiant disorder is diagnosed when a pre-adolescent child has trouble with authority, breaks school rules, always seems angry, or is easily annoyed, and the pattern of behaviors lasts for at least six months.

Conduct disorder is diagnosed when aggression expands to behaviors such as animal cruelty, destruction of property, theft, setting fires, serious violation of rules or breaking the law, substance abuse, or poor school performance. The diagnosis requires at least three incidents within a year.

Aggression may be related to another disorder such as ADHD, autism, anxiety or depression.

Treatment for children with aggression or defiant behavior includes the following;

- **Parent Management Training**-teaches parents to change the child’s behavior using positive reinforcement for desired behavior, differential attention, effective instruction-giving, appropriate consequences, and consistency across situations and settings.
- **Cognitive Problem-solving Skills Training** – focuses on problem-solving skills with a step-by-step approach. Often includes modeling, role-playing and reinforcement.
- Parent Management Training and Cognitive Problem-solving Skills Training are often used in conjunction
- **Medication** – may be used in certain circumstances but not always included in the treatment plan.

Resources for parents:

- *Your Defiant Child: Eight Steps to Better Behavior* by Russell Barkley PhD and Christine Benton
- *The Explosive Child* by Ross Greene PhD
- *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child* by Alan Kazdin
- Websites
 - <https://www.apa.org/act/resources/fact-sheets?tab=1>
 - www.stopbullying.gov

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