



*Canadian Psychiatric
Research Foundation*

When Something's Wrong O

Ideas for Families

Managing Problem Behaviour in Children



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Research shows that one in five children have a mental health problem and that this number may be even higher due to under-reporting. Many children exhibit difficulties both at home and in school, showing problems with mood, behaviour, or thinking. It's important to highlight that some children with these difficulties may have a brain dysfunction, and/or a language or learning disability for which effective treatment is available. Early identification and treatment is vitally important, since rapid attention can dramatically improve outcomes and reduce the stress levels for all people involved in the situation.

The onset of mental health difficulties can vary with the condition, and they are often hard to diagnose. For example, clinical depression has been seen in children under the age of five. It is not uncommon for some children to be diagnosed first with one condition and then another condition, as symptoms more clearly emerge. Sometimes two or more conditions exist together. Again, the expertise of experienced health practitioners is essential for proper assessment and treatment.

Don't be afraid to get a second or third opinion. The more you can find out, the more information you will have to help your child. And remember, don't forget to seek support from family and friends for yourself, as you embark on this journey of seeking answers and appropriate treatment for your child. There are often no "quick fixes."

Of course, children may also exhibit normal but problematic behaviours temporarily, during stressful periods such as divorce, the death/illness of a loved one, or moving to a new city or school. In addition, difficulties may arise from problems with schoolwork or social interactions with others. These behaviours may not necessarily be an indication of a disorder. As a parent, you may be able to deal with these problems on your own, but you may also want to seek assistance from a health practitioner to make sure that they do not reflect more severe conditions.

In summary, then, many behaviours that appear in children and adolescents may be of short duration and quite normal for their age and stage of development, while others of longer duration and intensity need professional intervention.

Please note: A point should be made here regarding child and adolescent language and learning disabilities, which are beyond the direct scope of this handbook. However, as you read through the handbook, you will notice that a number of the mental (or psychiatric) disorders described are often found along with various forms of language and learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia). Language and learning disabilities can be very stressful for young people, especially if unidentified. In fact, what may seem like a behaviour problem may really be the result of a child's problems with understanding and remembering. The "acting out" behaviour may be a reaction to the frustration associated with communication problems. Therefore, the fact that mental disorders and learning disabilities often co-exist further emphasizes the need for children and adolescents to be appropriately diagnosed by qualified professionals. These issues are complex and it is important that young people get the right assessment, treatment and support early in life. There is a large amount of information available on language and learning

disabilities, but for a place to start, try the **Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)** at **www.ldac-taac.ca** or **(613) 238-5721**. You can also ask for more information on your LDAC provincial organization or local chapter.

Another note: Some children with mental health problems may abuse substances, such as drugs or alcohol (i.e., self-medication) in order to cope. Substance abuse must be taken seriously, but any underlying cause(s) need to be addressed as well. For example, if a child is abusing drugs to calm anxiety, he/she may require treatment (e.g., therapy or prescribed medication) for an anxiety disorder. If you are concerned about substance abuse, discuss this with your family doctor or mental health professional. A large amount of information is available on substance abuse and addictions, but for a couple of places to start, try the **Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA)** at **www.ccsa.ca** or **(613) 235-4048**; or the **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health** at **www.camh.net** or **(416) 535-8501**.

Supporting Your Child – and Yourself

When supporting your child through any of these difficult situations, here are some things to remember:

1. Try to remain calm. It's not your fault. Don't feel guilty. Encourage others in the family not to feel guilty either.
2. Remember that children don't normally misbehave just to annoy you. Children do the best that they can, given the situations they are in.
3. Although it is hard, try not to reinforce negative behaviour with your own negative reactions (e.g., fear, anger, hopelessness). Look for ways to be part of the solution and your child will see you being positive.
4. Stay on your child's side. Your child needs you on his/her side – no matter how difficult his/her behaviour. However, this does not mean that negative behaviours that are under your child's control should be ignored.
5. Be aware that your child's condition may negatively impact on his/her peers, friends and classmates. Your child may lose connections and opportunities to socialize and become more isolated and lonely. While supporting your child, try to help your child's teacher and close friends to understand the kind of support your child may need during his/her difficult times.
6. Try not to get worn out. Work to take care of yourself through adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise. Many parents say that parent support groups are one of the best ways of getting the help they need. Search for a parent support group, or start one in your community. Bring your spouse or partner to the group. Ask at your child's school, your local community centre or hospital, or see the *Resources* section in the back of this handbook.
7. Seek professional help and a support group for your child, but don't forget other family members. Involve family members in the process. Communicate often and work together to develop an understanding of the situation and of how everyone can help and support each other.

We hope this handbook will help you:

- With strategies and ideas to use at home, to better your situation.
- To recognize when there is a need to ask for help or pursue a professional assessment.
- To access appropriate professionals, resources and groups within Canada's mental health care system.
- To manage both temporary behaviours, and/or a major life changing disorder.
- To aid your child in managing his/her own behaviour over time.
- To help you create a better parent-child relationship during a difficult situation.
- To decrease anxiety for both you and your child.
- To gain a better understanding of mental health issues and mental disorders, and empower you to advocate and press for positive change, if needed.
- To realize that you are not alone.

Finally, try to have patience. These problems take months, and sometimes years, to resolve. Try to prepare yourself for the frustration that naturally goes along with such situations. And, remember, you are not alone.

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Some General Coping Strategies

- 1. Provide controlled opportunities for your child to express emotions.** For example, talk about his/her feelings and explain that many people have these feelings at times. Have your child draw a picture of how he/she is feeling and then discuss the picture together.
- 2. Involve your child in activities** outside of home and school where he/she can experience some success and be part of a group activity (e.g., sports team, Scouts or Brownies, music/dance classes). Inform group leaders of your child's situation and strategies that you have found to be successful.
- 3. Listen actively to your child.** Try to find time every day to listen and talk about something that he/she is interested in. Try not to jump in with your opinion – just listen!
- 4. Monitor your child's online Internet and "chat room" activity.** Children can sometimes use the computer to pass their negative thoughts and worries along to others, sometimes creating a "contagious" effect or making those with a disorder worse-off (e.g., children viewing Internet Web sites that promote eating disorders like Anorexia Nervosa).
- 5. Recognize, acknowledge and reward your child with praise** when he/she makes an effort to do something positive (e.g., writing an interesting school paper, responding positively to a request, or lending a helping hand with chores at home). Make a big deal out of it!
- 6. Find an opportunity every day to tell your child that you love him/her.**
- 7. Model positive behaviour** by showing patience, support and good listening skills.

8. Aim to build resilience in your child, yourself, and your family, as you cope with difficulty and stress.

Resilience focuses on building from your child's (and your) strengths, not weaknesses. The goal is to foster an ability to recover from and adjust more easily to misfortune or change. So, try to skip the criticism, shame, and blame, and focus instead on what your child can do. Ask yourself, "Will he/she be better able to handle this same situation next time because of what I'm doing right now?"

9. Try to avoid arguments and power struggles. The best way to prevent a power struggle is to actively listen to your child.

10. Provide short "time outs"

for a young child (10 minutes maximum) and quiet times for an older child when he/she misbehaves. Don't use time outs as a punishment; rather, as a cooling off period so your child can calm down and then return to his/her activity when feeling better and ready to manage his/her behaviour. If you're angry when you give a time out, you've waited too long.

11. Insist on the importance of your child carrying out your requests.

Restate your expectations where possible, and point out the consequences of complying or not. Analyze the situation together and set time limits for compliance. Work as a team. See the following "Tips for Discussing Discipline and Behavioural Issues with Your Child" for more information.

12. **Do not use physical punishment.** Doing so could create a negative cycle with your child seeing you as an enemy, rather than a friend who is on his/her side; it could become a behaviour model that your child uses to attack others.
13. **Try not to yell.** State how you are feeling using a sentence that starts with “I” (e.g., “I am feeling very angry because...”) and target your child’s behaviour, not your child. “I” statements, rather than destructive “You” comments (e.g., “You always...”), help your child maintain his/her dignity.
14. **Recognize your own anger.** When you notice signs of anger or resentful thoughts, take steps immediately to reduce your stress level. For example, take a few deep breaths, try to find some humour in the situation, count to 10, go into another room, go for a walk, talk to your spouse or a friend, listen to soothing music, or lie down. Anger is a legitimate feeling, but normally doesn’t help you solve the problem at hand. It is usually a “cover” for feelings of hurt or powerlessness. It’s normal to feel this way in difficult situations, and it’s alright to take some time out and then try to get yourself back into problem-solving mode.

15. **Be prepared to invest the time.** Try not to look for the “quick fix” solution, and try to view life as a “marathon” instead of a “sprint”. In other words, sometimes you will experience the “one step forward, two steps backward” phenomenon, but over the long-term, a difference can often be seen.
16. **Explain your reasons for the decisions you are making.** When children understand why you are doing or expecting something, they feel less confused and are less likely to consider your actions to be arbitrary. This makes it easier for them to comply and offers them an opportunity to rationally disagree – which can open the door to dialogue.

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Tips for Discussing Discipline and Behavioural Issues with Your Child

- **Talk in private**, or if in a group of people, move to the edge of the crowd and speak quietly. Avoid embarrassing your child.
- **Move closer to your child** than normal conversational distance would require, and bend to their level. This helps to maintain dignity for both parties.
- **Make direct and prolonged eye contact with your child while you calmly speak.** Give the message that you are in control. Try not to resort to highly emotional scolding, or a lecture. Speak slowly, firmly, and in a normal tone of voice. Make your message short and simple; children often have a difficult time processing the most important part of what you are saying, especially when they are upset. If necessary, patiently repeat what you have said until they understand. This point is particularly important if a child is language or learning impaired.
- **Ask your child to repeat** what you have said in his/her own words.
- **Use appropriate consequences, not physical force or arbitrary punishments, when you need to discipline your child.**
 - **Appropriate consequences are:**
 - **Clear** and specific;
 - **Logical** and related to the behaviour;
 - **Time limited:** the consequence (positive or negative) should begin right away and be reasonably timed;
 - **Often set or discussed in advance** so your child knows what to expect;
 - **Respectful** to your child.
- **Convey the message that you care**, and that you are on your child's side.
- **Engage in discussion** and problem-solve with your child. Ask how he/she is feeling and what might work better next time.
- **Don't compare your child to other children or siblings.**



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