

Common Causes of Behavior Problems in Kids

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When children act out more than occasionally — with frequent tantrums, outbursts or defiance — the first step to dealing with the problem behavior is finding out what’s behind it. And the cause may not be obvious.

Especially when children are young, they may not be able to tell you what they’re feeling. And in fact they may not even know what’s bothering them.

Tantrums and outbursts are usually signs that kids are struggling with feelings they don’t have the skills to manage. They may be overwhelmed by their frustration or anger and not know how to express themselves more effectively, or calm themselves down. They may need help developing skills to control their behavior.

(For more information see [How Can We Help Kids With Self-Regulation.](#))

But if it’s happening a lot, it could be caused by a number of underlying issues.

Anxiety

We tend to think of anxious kids as shy, clingy or timid, but anxiety can also cause kids to act out. When anxious children are put into situations that trigger their anxiety, they may lash out or have a tantrum in an effort to escape that situation.

It’s not uncommon for it to happen at school, where demands and expectations may put pressure on them that they can’t handle. For instance, if a child who has social anxiety feels criticized, they might throw books and papers on the floor, or punch the person making them uncomfortable. And that behavior can be very confusing to teachers and other staff, since it seems to come out of nowhere.

(For more information see [How Anxiety Leads to Disruptive Behavior.](#))

ADHD

ADHD is usually diagnosed when kids are having trouble paying attention. But for many children with the disorder — and their parents — behavior is a big problem, too. They may ignore instructions. And they may lash out, throw a tantrum or be defiant when they are asked to do things they don’t want to do.

This behavior is often a result of ADHD symptoms. They may not do what they’re told because they are distracted, or because it’s unusually hard for them to tolerate tasks that are difficult or boring. They’re especially likely to misbehave if they’re asked to stop doing

something they enjoy, like playing a video game. So things like homework, going to bed, getting dressed and coming to dinner can become battlegrounds.

Children with ADHD are also more impulsive than other kids. They may be overwhelmed with frustration or other powerful feelings, and might impulsively throw a shoe or push someone or yell “shut up!”

(For more information see [ADHD and Behavior Problems](#).)

Learning Disorders

If a child acts out repeatedly in school or during homework time it could be the result of a learning disorder. If, for instance, they have trouble with math problems or a writing assignment, rather than ask for help, they might rip up the paper or start something with another child to create a diversion.

Kids who find learning harder than other kids do can be very frustrated and lose their temper frequently. And if they don't know they have a learning disorder, they can worry that they're stupid. So they often tend to hide their struggles. Getting into trouble might be less painful than letting people know that something is wrong with them. Paying attention to when the problem behavior happens can lead to exposing a learning issue and getting a child help.

For more information see [Supporting the Emotional Needs of Kids With Learning Disorders](#)

Sensory Processing Problems

Children who have trouble processing sensory information can have extreme and confusing behavior when their senses are overwhelmed. They might do things like scream if their faces get wet or have a meltdown if they're in a situation that's too bright, noisy or crowded. They might refuse to wear clothes that they find uncomfortable or eat food that feels wrong in their mouths.

Kids with sensory problems can also be rigid about routines and get upset or resist changes that seem insignificant to other people. They are also at risk for running away when an environment feels too overwhelming for them. The “fight or flight” response can kick in when kids are feeling overloaded with sensory input, and their panicked reactions can put them in real danger.

(For more information see [Sensory Processing Issues Explained](#).)

Depression

Some children who have frequent temper tantrums have a disorder called disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, or DMDD. These kids have severe tantrums with chronic irritability in between outbursts. They tend to view things negatively, and are quick to explode over issues

that seem minor to other people.

(For more information, see [DMDD: Extreme Tantrums and Irritability](#).)

Autism

Children on the autism spectrum are often prone to dramatic meltdowns. These children tend to be rigid — dependent on consistent routines for their emotional comfort — and any unexpected change can set them off. And they may lack the language and communication skills to express what they want or need.

Some behavior problems in kids with autism can be caused by medical issues that have gone unrecognized, especially in kids who are nonverbal. These include things like acid reflux, constipation, allergies, menstrual cramps, ear infections and even bone fractures. All kids exhibit more negative behaviors when they don't feel well, and kids on the spectrum may explode out of frustration that they are in pain and don't know how to communicate it, or make it stop.

For more information see [Autism Behaviors: Do They Reflect Medical Issues?](#)

Trauma

Children who have been subjected to trauma or abuse often have trouble managing strong emotions. As babies and toddlers, children learn from adults how to calm and soothe themselves by being calmed and soothed by adults. If they haven't had that experience, because of neglect, they can be quick to act out when they get upset, and have trouble calming down. They need coaching and practice at de-escalating when they feel overwhelmed.

Kids who have experienced trauma also tend to interpret other people as hostile to them, so they may act out irritably in response. They may develop the belief that they're bad, and what's happened to them is their fault. This leads to the expectation that people are not going to like them or treat them well, so there's no point in trying to behave.

(For more information see [How Trauma Affects Kids in School](#).)

Behavior Problems



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