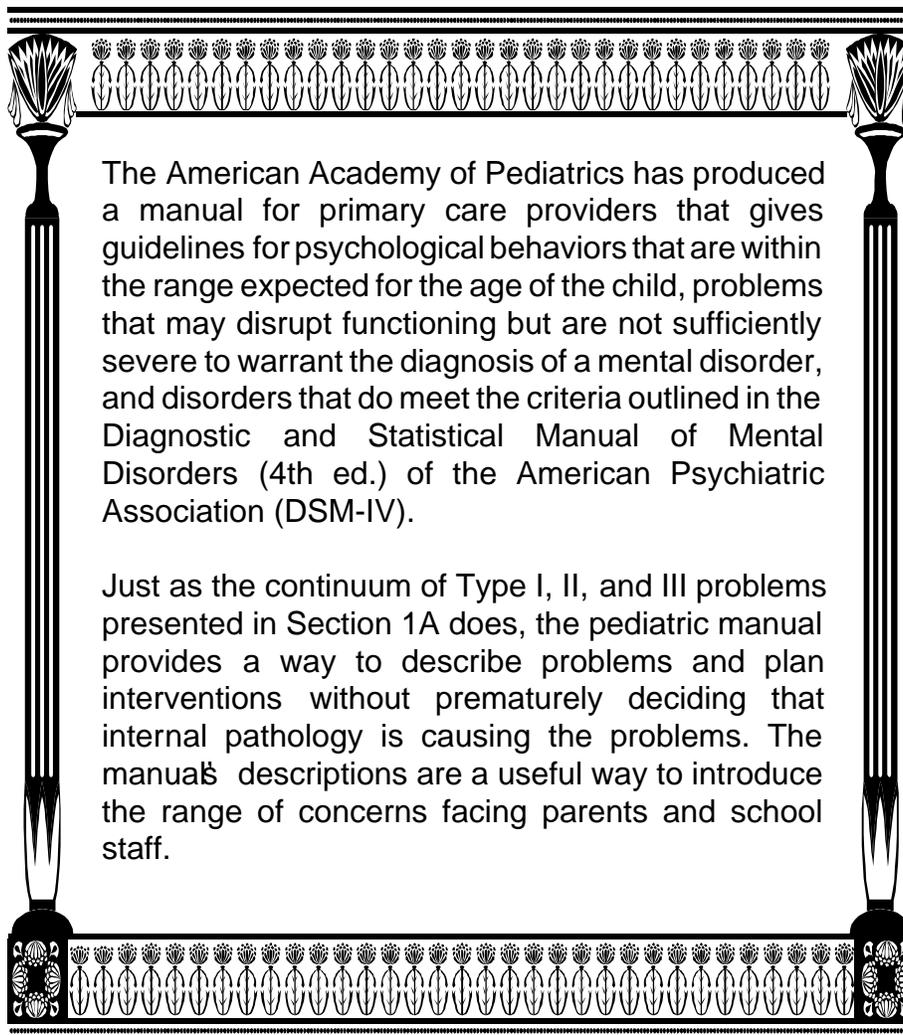


# The Broad Continuum of Conduct and Behavioral Problems

- A. Developmental Variations
- B. Problems
- C. Disorders



The American Academy of Pediatrics has produced a manual for primary care providers that gives guidelines for psychological behaviors that are within the range expected for the age of the child, problems that may disrupt functioning but are not sufficiently severe to warrant the diagnosis of a mental disorder, and disorders that do meet the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.) of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV).

Just as the continuum of Type I, II, and III problems presented in Section 1A does, the pediatric manual provides a way to describe problems and plan interventions without prematurely deciding that internal pathology is causing the problems. The manual's descriptions are a useful way to introduce the range of concerns facing parents and school staff.

# 1. Developmental Variations: Behaviors that are Within the Range of Expected Behaviors for That Age Group\*

## DEVELOPMENTAL VARIATION

### Negative Emotional Behavior Variation

Infants and preschool children typically display negative emotional behaviors when frustrated or irritable. The severity of the behaviors varies depending on temperament. The degree of difficulty produced by these behaviors depends, in part, on the skill and understanding of the caregivers.

## COMMON DEVELOPMENTAL PRESENTATIONS

### Infancy

The infant typically cries in response to any frustration, such as hunger or fatigue, or cries for no obvious reason, especially in late afternoon, evening, and nighttime hours.

### Early Childhood

The child frequently cries and whines, especially when hungry or tired, is easily frustrated, frequently displays anger by hitting and biting, and has temper tantrums when not given his or her way.

### Middle Childhood

The child has temper tantrums, although usually reduced in degree and frequency, and pounds his or her fists or screams when frustrated.

### Adolescence

The adolescent may hit objects or slam doors when frustrated and will occasionally curse or scream when angered.

## SPECIAL INFORMATION

These negative emotional behaviors are associated with temperamental traits, particularly low adaptability, high intensity, and negative mood (...). These behaviors decrease drastically with development, especially as language develops. These behaviors are also especially responsive to discipline.

Environmental factors, especially depression in the parent (...), are associated with negative emotional behaviors in the child. However, these behaviors are more transient than those seen in adjustment disorder (...).

These behaviors increase in situations of environmental stress such as child neglect or physical/sexual abuse (...), but again the behaviors are more transient than those seen in adjustment disorder (...).

As children grow older, their negative emotions and behaviors come under their control. However, outbursts of negative emotional behaviors including temper tantrums are common in early adolescence when adolescents experience frustration in the normal developmental process of separating from their nuclear family and also experience a normal increase in emotional reactivity. However, a decrease in negative emotional behaviors is associated with normal development in middle to late adolescence.

\*Adapted from *The Classification of Child and Adolescent Mental Diagnoses in Primary Care*. (1996) American Academy of Pediatrics

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## DEVELOPMENTAL VARIATIONS

### Aggressive/Oppositional Variation

#### *Oppositionality*

Mild opposition with mild negative impact is a normal developmental variation. Mild opposition may occur several times a day for a short period. Mild negative impact occurs when no one is hurt, no property is damaged, and parents do not significantly alter their plans.

## DEVELOPMENTAL VARIATIONS

### Aggressive/Oppositional Variation

#### *Aggression*

In order to assert a growing sense of self nearly all children display some amount of aggression, particularly during periods of rapid developmental transition. Aggression tends to decline normatively with development. Aggression is more common in younger children, who lack self-regulatory skills, than in older children, who internalize familial and societal standards and learn to use verbal mediation to delay gratification. Children may shift normatively to verbal opposition with development. Mild aggression may occur several times per week, with minimal negative impact.

\*Adapted from The Classification of Child and Adolescent Mental Diagnoses in Primary Care. (1996) American Academy of Pediatrics

## COMMON DEVELOPMENTAL PRESENTATIONS

### Infancy

The infant sometimes flails, pushes away, shakes head, gestures refusal, and dawdles. These behaviors may not be considered aggressive intentions, but the only way the infant can show frustration or a need for control in response to stress, e.g., separation from parents, intrusive interactions (physical or sexual), overstimulation, loss of family member, change in caregivers.

### Early Childhood

The child's negative behavior includes saying "no" as well as all of the above behaviors but with increased sophistication and purposefulness. The child engages in brief arguments, uses bad language, purposely does the opposite of what is asked, and procrastinates.

### Middle Childhood

The child's oppositional behaviors include all of the above behaviors, elaborately defying doing chores, making up excuses, using bad language, displaying negative attitudes, and using gestures that indicate refusal.

### Adolescence

The adolescent's oppositional behaviors include engaging in more abstract verbal arguments, demanding reasons for requests, and often giving excuses.

## SPECIAL INFORMATION

Oppositional behavior occurs in common situations such as getting dressed, picking up toys, during meals, or at bedtime. In early childhood, these situations broaden to include preschool and home life. In middle childhood, an increase in school-related situations occurs. In adolescence, independence-related issues become important.

## COMMON DEVELOPMENTAL PRESENTATIONS

### Infancy

The infant's aggressive behaviors include crying, refusing to be nurtured, kicking, and biting, but are usually not persistent.

### Early Childhood

The child's aggressive behaviors include some grabbing toys, hating siblings and others, kicking, and being verbally abusive to others, but usually responds to parental reprimand.

### Middle Childhood

The child's aggressive behaviors include some engaging in all of the above behaviors, with more purposefulness, getting even for perceived injustice, inflicting pain on others, using profane language, and bullying and hitting peers. The behaviors are intermittent and there is usually provocation.

### Adolescence

The adolescent exhibits overt physical aggression less frequently, curses, mouths off, and argues, usually with provocation.

## SPECIAL INFORMATION

In middle childhood, more aggression and self-defense occur at school and with peers. During adolescence, aggressive and oppositional behaviors blend together in many cases.

## 2. Problems – Behaviors Serious Enough to Disrupt Functioning with Peers, at School, at Home, but Not Severe Enough to Meet Criteria of a Mental Disorder.\*

### PROBLEM

#### Negative Emotional Behavior Problem

Negative emotional behaviors that increase (rather than decrease) in intensity, despite appropriate caregiver management, and that begin to interfere with child-adult or peer interactions may be a problem. These behaviors also constitute a problem when combined with other behaviors such as hyperactivity/impulsivity (see Hyperactive/ Impulsive Behaviors cluster ...), aggression (see Aggressive/ Oppositional Behavior cluster, ...), and/or depression (see Sadness and Related Symptoms cluster, ...). However, the severity and frequency of these behaviors do not meet the criteria for disorder.

### COMMON DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS

#### Infancy

The infant flails, pushes away, shakes head, gestures refusal, and dawdles. These actions should not be considered aggressive intentions, but the only way the infant can show frustration or a need for control in response to stress--e.g., separation from parents, intrusive interactions (physical or sexual), overstimulation, loss of a family member, or change in caregivers.

#### Early Childhood

The child repeatedly, despite appropriate limit setting and proper discipline, has intermittent temper tantrums. These behaviors result in caregiver frustration and can affect interactions with peers.

#### Middle Childhood

The child has frequent and/or intense responses to frustrations, such as losing in games or not getting his or her way. Negative behaviors begin to affect interaction with peers.

#### Adolescence

The adolescent has frequent and/or intense reactions to being denied requests and may respond inappropriately to the normal teasing behavior of others. The adolescent is easily frustrated, and the behaviors associated with the frustration interfere with friendships or the completion of age-appropriate tasks.

### SPECIAL INFORMATION

Intense crying frustrates caregivers. The typical response of caregivers must be assessed in order to evaluate the degree of the problem.

The presence of skill deficits as a source of frustration must be considered (e.g., the clumsy child who does not succeed in games in early childhood or in sports in later childhood and adolescence, or the child with a learning disability [...]).

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**PROBLEM****Aggressive/Oppositional Problem****Oppositionality**

The child will display some of the symptoms listed for oppositional defiant disorder (...). The frequency of the opposition occurs enough to be bothersome to parents or supervising adults, but not often enough to be considered a disorder.

**COMMON DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS****Infancy**

The infant screams a lot, runs away from parents a lot, and ignores requests.

**Early Childhood**

The child ignores requests frequently enough to be a problem, dawdles frequently enough to be a problem, argues back while doing chores, throws tantrums when asked to do some things, messes up the house on purpose, has a negative attitude many days, and runs away from parents on several occasions.

**Middle Childhood**

The child intermittently tries to annoy others such as turning up the radio on purpose, making up excuses, begins to ask for reasons why when given commands, and argues for longer times. These behaviors occur frequently enough to be bothersome to the family.

**Adolescence**

The adolescent argues back often, frequently has a negative attitude, sometimes makes obscene gestures, and argues and procrastinates in more intense and sophisticated ways.

**PROBLEM****Aggressive/Oppositional Problem****Aggression**

When levels of aggression and hostility interfere with family routines, begin to engender negative responses from peers or teachers, and/or cause disruption at school, problematic status is evident. The negative impact is moderate. People change routines; property begins to be more seriously damaged. The child will display some of the symptoms listed for conduct disorder (...) but not enough to warrant the diagnosis of the disorder. However, the behaviors are not sufficiently intense to qualify for a behavioral disorder.

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**SPECIAL INFORMATION**

All children occasionally defy adult requests for compliance, particularly the requests of their parents. More opposition is directed toward mothers than fathers. Boys display opposition more often than girls and their opposition tends to be expressed by behaviors that are more motor oriented. The most intense opposition occurs at the apex of puberty for boys and the onset of menarche for girls.

**COMMON DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS****Infancy**

The infant bites, kicks, cries, and pulls hair fairly frequently.

**Early Childhood**

The child frequently grabs others' toys, shouts, hits or punches siblings and others, and is verbally abusive.

**Middle Childhood**

The child gets into fights intermittently in school or in the neighborhood, swears or uses bad language sometimes in inappropriate settings, hits or otherwise hurts self when angry or frustrated.

**Adolescence**

The adolescent intermittently hits others, uses bad language, is verbally abusive, may display some inappropriate suggestive sexual behaviors.

**SPECIAL INFORMATION**

Problem levels of aggressive behavior may run in families. When marked aggression is present, the assessor must examine the family system, the types of behaviors modeled, and the possibility of abusive interactions.

### 3. Disorders that Meet the Criteria of a Mental Disorder as Defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (Edition 4, 1994)

#### DISORDERS

##### Conduct Disorder Childhood Onset

##### Conduct Disorder Adolescent Onset

A repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. Onset may occur as early as age 5 to 6 years, but is usually in late childhood or early adolescence. The behaviors harm others and break societal rules including stealing, fighting, destroying property, lying, truancy, and running away from home.

(see DSM-IV criteria ...)

##### Adjustment Disorder With Disturbance of Conduct

(see DSM-IV criteria ...)

##### Disruptive Behavior Disorder, NOS

(see DSM-IV criteria ...)

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#### COMMON DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS

##### Infancy

It is not possible to make the diagnosis.

##### Early Childhood

Symptoms are rarely of such a quality or intensity to be able to diagnose the disorder.

##### Middle Childhood

The child often may exhibit some of the following behaviors: lies, steals, fights with peers with and without weapons, is cruel to people or animals, may display some inappropriate sexual activity, bullies, engages in destructive acts, violates rules, acts deceitful, is truant from school, and has academic difficulties.

##### Adolescence

The adolescent displays delinquent, aggressive behavior, harms people and property more often than in middle childhood, exhibits deviant sexual behavior, uses illegal drugs, is suspended/expelled from school, has difficulties with the law, acts reckless, runs away from home, is destructive, violates rules, has problems adjusting at work, and has academic difficulties.

#### SPECIAL INFORMATION

The best predictor of aggression that will reach the level of a disorder is a diversity of antisocial behaviors exhibited at an early age; clinicians should be alert to this factor. Oppositional defiant disorder usually becomes evident before age 8 years and usually not later than early adolescence. Oppositional defiant disorder is more prevalent in males than in females before puberty, but rates are probably equal after puberty. The occurrence of the following negative environmental factors may increase the likelihood, severity, and negative prognosis of conduct disorder: parental rejection and neglect (...), inconsistent management with harsh discipline, physical or sexual child abuse (...), lack of supervision, early institutional living (...), frequent changes of caregivers (...), and association with delinquent peer group. Suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicide occur at a higher than expected rate (see Suicidal Thoughts or Behaviors cluster). If the criteria are met for both oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder, only code conduct disorder.

## DISORDERS

### Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Hostile, defiant behavior towards others of at least 6 months duration that is developmentally inappropriate.

- often loses temper
- often argues with adults
- often actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules
- often deliberately annoys people
- often blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior
- is often touchy or easily annoyed by others
- is open angry and resentful
- is often spiteful or vindictive

(see DSM-IV Criteria...)

## COMMON DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS

### Infancy

It is not possible to make the diagnosis.

### Early Childhood

The child is extremely defiant, refuses to do as asked, mouths off, throws tantrums.

### Middle Childhood

The child is very rebellious, refusing to comply with reasonable requests, argues often, and annoys other people on purpose.

**Adolescence** The adolescent is frequently rebellious, has severe arguments, follows parents around while arguing, is defiant, has negative attitudes, is unwilling to compromise, and may precociously use alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs.

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