

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

What is it?

ODD is a psychiatric disorder that is characterized by two different sets of problems. These are aggressiveness and a tendency to purposefully bother and irritate others. It is often the reason that people seek treatment. When ODD is present with ADHD, depression, tourette's, anxiety disorders, or other neuropsychiatric disorders, it makes life with that child far more difficult. For Example, ADHD plus ODD is much worse than ADHD alone, often enough to make people seek treatment. The criteria for ODD are:

A pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior lasting at least six months during which four or more of the following are present:

- 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
- Often touchy or easily annoyed by others
- Often angry and resentful
- Often spiteful and vindictive

The disturbance in behavior causes clinically significant impairment in social, academic, or occupational functioning.

How often is "often"?

All of the criteria above include the word "often". But what exactly does that mean? Recent studies have shown that these behaviors occur to a varying degree in all children. These researchers have found that the "often" is best solved by the following criteria.

Has occurred at all during the last three months-

- Spiteful and vindictive
- Blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior

Occurs at least twice a week

- Touchy or easily annoyed by others
- Loses temper
- Argues with adults
- Actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules

Occurs at least four times per week

- Angry and resentful
- Deliberately annoys people

What causes it?

No one knows for certain. The usual pattern is for problems to begin between ages 1-3. If you think about it, a lot of these behaviors are normal at age 2, but in this disorder they never go away. It does run in families. If a parent is alcoholic and has been in trouble with the law, their children are almost three times as likely to have ODD. That is, 18% of children will have ODD if the parents are alcoholic and the father has been in trouble with the law.

How can you tell if a child has it?

ODD is diagnosed in the same way as many other psychiatric disorders in children. You need to examine the child, talk with the child, talk to the parents, and review the medical history. Sometimes other medical tests are necessary to make sure it is not something else. You always need to check children out for other psychiatric disorders, as it is common the children with ODD will have other problems, too.

Who gets it?

A lot of children! This is the most common psychiatric problem in children. Over 5% of children have this. In younger children it is more common in boys than girls, but as they grow older, the rate is the same in males and females.

ODD rarely travels alone

It is exceptionally rare for a physician to see a child with only ODD. Usually the child has some other neuropsychiatric disorder along with ODD. The tendency for disorders in medicine to occur together is called comorbidity. Understanding comorbidity in pediatric psychiatry is one of the most important areas of research at this moment.

What happens to children who have this when they grow up?

First, there will be some lucky children who outgrow this. The exact number is not clear, but probably not the majority. The aggressiveness is very stable. That is, aggressive 2 year olds are likely to be aggressive 20 year olds. Only IQ is more stable over years than aggression.

Second, ODD may turn into conduct disorder (CD). This usually happens fairly early. That is, after 3-4 years of ODD, if it hasn't turned into CD, it won't ever. What predicts a child with ODD getting CD? Having a biological parent who was a career criminal and/or very severe ODD.

Third, the child may continue to have ODD. Recent work suggests that this is probably the most common path. If you look at a group of preschool boys who have ODD and check them out two years later, about 75% still have something wrong. Sometimes, ODD at that age changes into something else, but that is rare. More often ADHD and ODD just continue on. The more common thing that happens is that children with ODD develop signs of mood disorders or anxiety, as they get older. By the time these children are in the end of elementary school, about 25% will have mood or anxiety problems which are disabling. That means that it is very important to watch for signs of mood disorder and anxiety, as children with ODD grow older.

Will children with ODD end up as criminals?

Probably not, unless they develop conduct disorder. Even then many will grow out of it. Life may not be easy. People with ODD who are grown up often do best if they can work for themselves and stay away from alcohol. However their tendency to irritate others often leads to a lonely life.

What is the difference between ODD and ADHD?

ODD is characterized by aggressiveness, but not impulsiveness. In ODD people annoy you purposefully, while it is usually not so purposeful in ADHD. ODD signs and symptoms are much more difficult to live with than ADHD. ADHD sometimes goes away, but ODD rarely does. ODD is not characterized by poor social skills. Children with ODD can sit still.

What difference does it make if you have ADHD or ADHD plus ODD?

A lot! Children and adolescents with ADHD alone do things without thinking, but not necessarily aggressive things. An ADHD child may impulsively push someone too hard on a swing and knock the child down on the ground. She would likely be sorry she did this afterward. A child with ODD plus ADHD might push the kid out of the swing and say she didn't do it, and then brag about it to her friends later. ADHD plus ODD children and adolescents are in a lot of trouble as their impulsiveness and hyperactivity often lead to fights, rough play, and huge temper tantrums.

My child has been diagnosed with ODD. I don't like to say this, but no one can stand him. Is this common?

Unfortunately, it is quite common. In comparison to ADHD alone, children and adolescents with ODD plus ADHD or just ODD are much more difficult to be with. The destructiveness and disagreeableness are purposeful.

They like to see you get mad. Every request can end up as a power struggle. Lying becomes a way of life, and getting a reaction out of others is the chief hobby. Perhaps hardest of all to bear, they rarely are truly sorry and often believe nothing is their fault. After a huge blow up, the child with ODD is often calm and collected. It is the parents who look as they are going to lose it, not the child. This is understandable. The parents have probably just been tricked, bullied, lied to or have witnessed temper tantrums which know no limits.