



Disruptive behaviour

It's 8.45 am on a school day. Everyone is ready to leave except Jason (8 years old). He has spent the morning in his pyjamas watching TV, playing with the dog, and fighting with his sister. Repeated requests from his mother to get ready have not produced any progress. Finally, she yells at him, and threatens him with no TV for a week. He flies into a rage and kicks her.... At interview, his mother said, "I find Jason difficult to like" and "This is not the kind of child I hoped for" and "I love Jason, but I don't like him at all".

This is an example of commonly occurring disruptive behavior and the negative emotional reactions associated with it. Disruptive behavior includes any behavior that interferes with the smooth flow of daily life and the achievement of goals. Disruptive behaviors include oppositional behavior, noncompliance, defiant responses, verbally and physically aggressive acts, interrupting others, hyperactivity, refusing to wait, and difficulty with initiating or finishing tasks. Disruptive behaviors can develop into conduct problems, which are characterised by their violation of the rights of others.

Ways of describing disruptive behaviors are varied. Disruptive behaviors may range in intensity from mild to severe; the behaviors may occur in only one setting or in many settings; or behaviors may be described as "normal" or "abnormal", depending on the child's developmental stage. For example, the drive for mastery and independence expressed as oppositionality is a normal hallmark of the two-to-three year old and of the early adolescent. Disruptive behaviors are associated with a broad range of considerations in three major areas: Factors within the child (e.g. temperament, disorders), factors within the parent (e.g. temperament and parenting style), and environmental factors (e.g. family systems, life stressors).

Factors within the child:

Temperament: Each child arrives in the world with a particular profile of temperamental traits, for example, getting excited quickly compared with being really laid back, being very active and restless compared with being placid and relaxed, and seeking out stimulation compared with shrinking from stimulation. Different temperamental traits drive different kinds of behavior. For example a child who is easily excitable may have more temper outbursts than a child who is very placid.

Disorder: Similarly, a child with a disorder such as a learning disability, developmental delay or attentional problems may find it difficult to follow instructions, execute complex routines like getting dressed or wait for what they want.

Factors within the parent

Temperament: The particular temperament of the parent, and more importantly, the fit between the parent's and child's temperaments significantly affects their relationship. For example, a very cautious parent may find a risk-taking child particularly challenging.

Parenting style: All parents have had experiences of being parented themselves and these experiences influence how they parent their own children. In addition, knowledge about what can be expected from children at different developmental stages and knowledge about the principles of behavior change contribute strongly to parenting styles. Two parents may have similar ideas about parenting or may be diametrically opposed in their beliefs and practices. Parenting styles may decrease, maintain or inadvertently increase disruptive behavior in children.

Environmental factors:

Environmental factors impacting on children's behavior include major changes, losses and stresses or more chronic impacts from poverty, limited support from extended family or the community, and parental or sibling illness.

In many cases, disruptive behaviors can be managed with common-sense approaches including concentrating on the child's positive behaviors and ignoring the undesirable behaviors. There should also be clear, simple, consistent consequences for disruptive behavior. Parents can promote positive behaviors by noticing and praising children's good behaviors as often as possible. A useful way of remembering this is the phrase "Catch them when they're good".

Developmentally appropriate expectations of children's behavior and the basic principles of behavior change go a long way to understanding and managing disruptive behaviors. A simple principle states that, when behaviors are given attention, they tend to be repeated. Parents sometimes fall into the trap of trying to resolve problem behaviors by arguing with the child about them. Unfortunately, trying to reason with a small child about their behavior can result in parent and child becoming worked up, and may result in anger and resentment. Additionally, any attention given to a behavior (telling off and yelling count as attention) increases the chances that it will happen again. Obviously, severe physical punishment may be some kind of deterrent, but carries many detrimental consequences in terms of unhappy relationships, emotional problems, poor self esteem, and anger and resentment. Practical strategies include relationship building exercises between parent and child, and ways of delivering instructions and ensuring compliance in helpful ways. Once you have a warm relationship with your child, brief instructions given in a calm and firm tone of voice when both are paying attention (backed up by firm and fair consequences for non-compliance) work best. A warning should always be given of what the consequences will be for non-compliance. When a child complies with a request, acknowledgement and praise should be immediate. Conversely, appropriate consequences are those that occur close to the time of the problem behavior, are fair and are logically related to the behavior. For example, two children may be fighting over the PlayStation. A first step consequence may be that the PlayStation is switched off for 10 minutes. If fighting resumes, access may be denied for a longer period of time. Continued conflict may warrant a higher level of consequence, for example, isolation of the children (that is, time out) for a brief, specified period of time. As soon as conflict ceases, praise will serve to encourage future compliance. It is always important to bear in mind a particular child's temperament when employing behavior management strategies, accommodating difficulties or disabilities. For example, children with attentional problems need particularly strong, immediate, positive messages about appropriate behaviors. They also need clear and immediate consequences for disruptive behaviors.



How would all of this apply to Jason? It would depend on the particular factors that are present in this case, but some behavioral strategies would include setting up clear, simple expectations (that are age-appropriate) for Jason regarding the morning routines. A discussion with him about these expectations would include rewards and consequences that will follow compliance and non-compliance. Instructions should be given firmly and clearly, with time limits made explicit. The emphasis should always be on the rewards, with consequences being enforced as a "back-up" option rather than the first option. Frequent praise and encouragement for compliance can be coupled with tangible rewards such as special times with mum or dad, extended privileges or small material rewards.

Alternatively, activities such as watching TV or playing with the dog before school could be dependant on his having completed specific morning routines; and failure to complete these routines could result in the removal of some privilege. Importantly, failure to complete these routines might result in natural consequences – like going to school without the equipment he needs because he's run out of time, and having to face the consequences at school.

In terms of the physical aggression, family rules could stipulate that this behavior is unacceptable, and that meaningful, consistent consequences follow such behavior as soon as possible after the incident. Rewards could be set up for periods of time that pass without incidents of sibling fighting – making sure that the system is set up with realistic expectations.

Children's compliance is largely dependant on the quality of the parent-child relationship, and it is well worth taking time to ensure that there is a foundation of positive emotion derived from positive relationship experiences between parent and child. Positive relationship experiences increase children's desire to please their parents, and thereby increase compliance.

The factors described earlier may make it more difficult to achieve success using a common-sense approach. When the everyday functioning of the child (and the family) are impaired by disruptive behavior despite best attempts to manage it, a professional may be consulted. Someone who is trained in child development, childhood disorders and behavior management can objectively address the problems with the family. Given that children's early development has a significant impact on their functioning later in life, it is well worth making every effort to help children learn to behave in ways that will increase their chances of leading happy, productive lives.