

Kids Behaving Badly

When Is It Time to Seek Professional Help?

By Jamie Fanelli

One of the greatest challenges parents face is managing their child's behavioral problems. Moving to or living in a foreign country, while an incredibly enriching experience, can cause even more confusion as it can bring about more challenges for children as they adjust to their new environment.

Many parents may suspect that there is something a little 'off' with their child and wonder if they should contact outside help. Parents are often the first to recognize their child



has a behavioral problem, frequently before pediatricians or teachers.

Therapy can provide both the parents and child the support and skills needed to address these life challenges

Still, deciding to seek help can be a difficult decision to make. Some families may hesitate because they worry about labeling their child while others may feel that they should be able to handle it themselves. Others may know their child needs help but don't know where to begin.

How do these families know if their child needs additional help? During this time, many questions may arise. Could their child just be "more immature" as his/her teacher speculated? Or perhaps just need more time to adjust after a major move?

Here are some behaviors that may signal a need for help:

- Exhibits significant decline in school performance
- Has difficulty coping with daily problems and activities or shows a lack of interest in previously desirable activities
- Has unusual difficulty concentrating or following directions
- Becomes withdrawn from others or socially isolated
- Experiences significant changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Has frequent unexplainable tantrums beyond age three
- Performs repetitive behaviors, such as hand washing or opening/closing doors
- Insists on strictly following a routine
- Exhibits persistent disobedience, self destructive or aggressive behaviors
- Displays impulsive or unsafe behaviors
- Exhibits severe mood swings
- Regularly refuses to attend school

Children may display some of these behaviors at various times throughout their development. While some ups and downs are normal, especially after a major move or other major life event, it may be time to

consult a professional if the behavior persists over an extended period of time or becomes more severe in intensity.

The Next Step: Seeking Help and the Evaluation

Evaluations typically take place over the course of a few visits to a pediatric clinic. During the initial meeting, the psychologist or therapist will discuss the concerns raised and gather relevant background information, as well as discuss how the parents can best prepare the child for the evaluation. Using the information collected, the psychologist will design an assessment plan centered on the concerns identified and the child's background.

After the initial consultation, the psychologist will often observe the child at school, and the child will return to the clinic for a comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation typically includes clinical observation, standardized testing as well as parent and/or teacher interviews.

The testing includes specifically designed tests that help determine the child's strengths and limitations. Unlike typical multiple choice

tests often taken in school, many of these tests are more engaging and 'hands on' and will explore the child's academic, language, motor, social, emotional and behavioral skills. The tests, along with the behavioral observations, help the psychologist discover the underlying cause of the problems and develop a treatment plan.

After the Evaluation

After completing the assessment, the psychologist will review the results and prepare a comprehensive report outlining observations, the testing results and the child's strengths and limitations. Individualized recommendations for both home and school are provided to help the child.

The psychologist will review the report with the family and answer any questions that they have and may also help design a treatment plan, which may or may not include additional therapy. Therapy can provide both the parents and child the support and skills needed to address these life challenges. Once an underlying problem is discovered or a diagnosis is made,

family involvement and active participation in the child's treatment is critical. The more empowered the parents, the more tools they have to support their child. As the old saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." Working as a team with therapists, teachers, other family members and friends, parents can help their child reach his or her full potential.

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