

ANXIETY AND DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID PROGRAM
DECEMBER 2018 RESOURCE SHARING

We have all witnessed a child having an “angry outburst” or meltdown. We may be quick to label that child or the behavior. What we need to consider is that disruptive behavior is often caused by unrecognized anxiety. A child who appears oppositional or aggressive may be reacting to anxiety he either can’t describe or even fully recognize that he is feeling.

In younger children with anxiety, you may see “freezing” and clinging behavior, but you can also see tantrums and complete meltdowns. Anxiety may show itself in a variety of ways in part because of the body’s physical response to a “threat” in the environment, a response that maximizes the body’s ability to either face danger or escape danger. Some children show anxiety by shrinking from situations or objects that trigger fear and others react with a need to “break out” of an uncomfortable situation. That “break out” behavior, which can be unmanageable, is often misread as anger or opposition. Anxiety can look like a lot of things. Particularly with children who many not have words to express their feelings, or because no one is listening to them, they might show their anxiety with disruptive behavior.

Sometimes symptoms of anxiety in children are commonly recognized ones such as trouble sleeping in their own room or separating from their parents, avoidance of activities or showing distress or withdrawal from new situations or people. Sometimes, however, the symptoms are not as commonly recognized and can show themselves as temper tantrums or disruption in school. It can be confusing and difficult to “read behaviors”, which may seem to come out of nowhere. Adding to the difficulty is that when anxious children become disruptive, they may push away the very adults who they need to help them feel secure. Children with anxiety need a lot of reassurance from adults.

Behaviors commonly associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), such as not paying attention, asking a lot of questions, moving around a lot and getting in other’s spaces, are also disruptive and can driven by anxiety.

It is always important to think about what is behind the behaviors. What might be causing our child to act this way? Because children are complicated and symptoms can overlap diagnostic categories, it is important to start by talking with your doctor about concerns and seek out a comprehensive diagnostic assessment if behaviors persist or become unmanageable.

Next month we will look at what adults can do to help children with anxiety and disruptive behavior .

<https://childmind.org/article/how-anxiety-leads-to-disruptive-behavior>