Control "Uncontrollable" Conduct Disorders

Kids who seriously victimize others, can seem impossible to manage. Some of these kids who chronically and severely hurt others, can be labeled "conduct disorders." In mainstream settings, just a small percentage of your kids are likely to be conduct disordered. In the justice system, they are common. The term can be confusing, and how to successfully manage these hard-to-control youth can be even more confounding.

Only mental health professionals are qualified to diagnose conduct disorders. Accurate diagnosis is crucial because many of the best methods to manage conduct disorders are very different from the relationship-based approaches used with other children. Here's some facts about conduct disorders, and some inventive ideas to best manage them.

Must-Know Facts About Conduct Disorders

Cost vs. Benefit is the Motivation

Sit-com character, Eddie Haskell from "Leave it to Beaver," offers a quick picture of a conduct disorder. Abusive to the weak, and over-adaptive towards those he perceived as powerful or useful, this cost-benefit motivation is the hallmark of the conduct disordered youth who has limited ability to empathize with or relate to others.

Best Interventions: Take charge of the cost-benefit ratio by raising the costs. Otherwise, the conduct disordered child may think, "I'm gonna kick that kid. The worst I'll get is detention."

Consequences Offer Control

You don't hit others because you'd feel bad. The conduct disorder isn't guided by empathy or remorse.

Best Interventions: It's the high cost of consequences, that stops misbehavior. Ensure consequences are "too costly."

Self-Interest is Paramount

Kids who can empathize, often are moved by concern for others. The conduct disorder is generally only concerned with what s/he wants or likes.

Best Interventions: Show that hurting others is not in their self-interest by implementing disliked consequences for misbehavior. Teach: hurting others often also "hurts" them by generating disliked consequences.

Power May Command "Respect"

Conduct disordered youth often operate on a utilitarian basis. People viewed as powerful or useful, may be treated more respectfully and compliantly because of the benefits this type of behavior can generate.

Best Interventions: If you are perceived as a "pawn", become a power by gaining the "muscle" the child respects. For example, the parole officer can "empower" you by letting you have significant input into the lock-up time the child gets.

Empathy is Limited

A conduct disorder may begin to form when an infant has no caring nurturer to bond with. It may be a loss that cannot be "fixed" later: the ability to care may be impaired forever.

Best Interventions: To lessen consequences, the child may claim to "feel bad" about again hurting others, but be very wary of expedient claims of remorse.
Many Truths About Kids Don't Fit Conduct Disorders

Much of the otherwise good, conventional wisdom about working with kids, doesn't fit conduct disordered youth. Here's the most common mismatches.

Act in a Consistent Manner: Many conduct disordered kids "read adults like open comic books." They are very adept at anticipating consequences, gauging reactions and spotting vulnerability. They use this information to manipulate effectively. Consistency becomes a problem when the conduct disordered youth can predict the likely consequence of misbehavior and decides to risk it. By "zig-zagging" and varying your response, the child is reluctant to risk an unexpected consequence with too high a cost.

Consequences Must Be Fair: Many adults can't quite determine "for sure," the conduct disordered child's role in misbehavior, and thus refrain from instituting consequences unfairly. Many conduct disordered youth perceive this and exploit it. If permitted at your site, tell the child you no longer guarantee fairness because in the "real world," bosses, landlords and police will not "play detective" and strive for absolute certainty and fairness; they'll use probable cause instead—meaning sometimes they may give sanctions "unfairly."

Develop a Bond: Because they may never have bonded during the critical period in infancy, conduct disorders may be unable to genuinely care about others. Relationship-based approaches that work well with other kids, may be irrelevant and ineffective, and easy to exploit. Remember: you'll have a relatively positive relationship with the conduct disorder only as long as you have value to him. After that, you're expendable.

Be Predictable: Conduct disordered youth often learn the adults' behavior patterns, such as a teacher's tendency to reduce consequences if a student shows remorse. Spot your patterns, then vary them with this population.

Bring Order to the Conduct Disorder

Channel the Manipulation: Being a manipulator can be positive. Manipulation only becomes a problem when it's destructive. Great careers can be built by those who effectively, legally and appropriately manipulate. Convincingly show and teach that.

Don't Guess: If you can't tell exactly how much misbehavior the conduct disordered child has done, don't fake it. The more disturbed the child, the better their "radar." Conduct disorders are often frighteningly perceptive. Instead, if permitted by your site policies, tell them that just like bosses and police in the "real world," if you simply suspect misdeeds, there may be consequences; certain proof will not be needed.

Assume the Worse: If you can't tell if you are being conned, you probably are. Simulate the "real world" where bosses and landladies don't invest huge amounts of time searching for the truth; they institute consequences.

Project Problems into the Adult World: For example, relate hitting classmates to hitting co-workers. Challenge the students to "find work where that behavior would work." There may be none.

Stay Detached: If you get mad, the conduct disorder may view it as a victory: they "made you" lose control. Be on guard: these perceptive youth often choose the "worst days" or very personal, unexpected ways to "push your buttons" and you to the breaking point.

Don't Fake It: Many conduct disorders "read vibes." If you're scared of them or unsure if you can manage them, that concern has more impact than actions you take. Get training, work through concerns.

Here's What a Conduct Disorder Can Look Like

The Negative Leader

The Sex Offender

The Disrupter

Lacking empathy for others, conduct disordered youth may take aggressive roles such as these.