

Four Traits

Common Characteristics of At-risk and Delinquent Youth

There are several similar ways at-risk youth and youth involved with the juvenile justice system behave. It is important to know what these behaviors might mean so you can understand and help your child.

DEPRESSION

The difficult teenage years are even harder when families have challenges, such as uncontrolled anger, physical or mental health problems and divorce. Your child may turn his anger inward and spend more time withdrawn from his friends and usual interests. This may result in depression — the most common teen psychological problem.

TIP: Even if your child is not showing concerning changes in his behavior, talk with him about how it is natural to feel upset at times. Encourage him to join friends in positive activities or express his feelings.

AGGRESSION

A youth who is aggressive often thinks everyone else is aggressive too. He thinks others are challenging him even when they are not. As a result, he may react defensively and bully or fight others and damage property.



By Pasco Prodigy
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TIP: Help your child think about other things people mean by their facial expression or words: “What if Jeff just said that because he was scared?” Get your child to express his feelings through words, not actions that may make the situation worse.

Many aggressive youth also think they are better than others. Despite any failures, they believe they are superior to others. When this belief is challenged, they may react with anger.

TIP: Help your child see how nobody is perfect—even you and him. Say, “I learn so much from others and realize how I can be better.” Then give an example.

Most aggressive youth feel badly for their actions. However, they typically blame the victim: “He had it coming because he acted like such a jerk.”

TIP: Discuss what the victim actually did and how your child could have reacted differently. Ask, “How did your actions make the situation better?”

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DISTRUST

A child who does not trust his parents, or other adults, may “take matters into his own hands.” He may try to solve his own problems (or ignore them) and make his own decisions.

If your child does NOT come to you for help, it may be because he knows he is doing something wrong and does not want to get caught. It also might mean he does not trust you. Whether your child should trust you does not matter. If he feels he cannot, he won’t.

TIP: To help build trust with your child, reassure him that you want to help. Assist him with making decisions by asking questions and discussing options. Try a guiding approach like, “What if...?” Once he makes a decision, tell him what you are going to do to support him.

LACK OF SELF-CONTROL

The more your child can control his behavior, the more self-control he has. Normally, children begin to gain self-control between ages 7 and 11 and continue to improve throughout the teen years. A child who does not have good self-control may act without thinking things through and engage in risky behaviors more often than other teens. He may:

- ◆ Argue and refuse to follow directions, even if he knows he is going to get into trouble.
- ◆ Pace back and forth or walk around in circles, talk or make noises, even after he is asked to stop.
- ◆ Burst out in anger about anything done to him, even when it is an accident.
- ◆ Not be able to wait, even a short time, for anything.

TIP: If your child cannot control his behavior well, help him calmly and slowly identify what is causing his distress. Help him address that distress with better reactions. Encourage him to repeat, “Think, think, think,” before he says or does anything.



Also, for children ages 6-11, see if there is a SNAP (Stop Now and Plan) program offered by DJJ in your area.

Call: _____

The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

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