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Antony D. Kidman  
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*Editors*

# Clinical Handbook of Assessing and Treating Conduct Problems in Youth

 Springer

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# Preface

Identifying evidence-based treatments for youth with conduct problems is vitally important, not only because conduct problems are the most common of all youth mental health problems, but also because the impairment associated with conduct problems is so severe and pervasive, costly to society and, at times, life threatening. For an individual, antisocial and aggressive behavior interferes with the ability to reach optimal potential in academic, occupational, and social pursuits. Families suffer as they struggle to manage challenging behaviors, ensure their safety, and deal with the social alienation that frequently goes hand in hand with raising aggressive youth. School communities are also affected. Teachers managing sizeable classrooms face pressure, often in the absence of specialized training, to circumvent demanding behaviors and protect the learning environment and safety of other students. Ultimately, one needs only to look to the daily newspapers, to stories of unemployment, crime, and violence at home, in schools, and on the streets, to understand the far-reaching impact of conduct problems on society.

That said, the development of evidence-based treatments for youth with conduct problems has not been a simple or straightforward undertaking. Indeed, it can be argued that few greater challenges in clinical psychology exist than that of understanding conduct problems and developing comprehensive treatments. The reasons for this are many, but the main obstacle concerns the complex etiological mechanisms at play in youth with conduct problems and the impact of these complexities on assessment and treatment. These youth constitute a heterogeneous group, and, because of this diversity, conduct problems are thought to be the product of multiple developmental pathways – each pathway with its own unique causal factors. If we consider how clinical treatments are formulated, we see they are typically guided by an understanding of causal and maintaining factors, and they are frequently based on the underlying assumption that a single etiological pathway is present in all individuals with a specified disorder. For youth with conduct problems, however, this approach is

overly simplistic as there is no single developmental pathway. With this in mind, it is clear why the identification of etiological mechanisms – the building blocks that inform the development of evidence-based treatment – has been such a complex undertaking. Although major advancements have been made (e.g., identification of broad risk factors), more remains to be achieved (e.g., the delineation of risk factors associated with specific developmental pathways).

Unraveling the etiology of conduct problems has not been the only challenge faced by researchers and clinicians in this field. Assessing and treating youth with conduct problems typically requires a systemic approach that relies on the cooperation of parents, the child or adolescent, and, sometimes, extended family and school staff. Maintaining the ongoing participation and cooperation of all parties, however, can be difficult. Therapy with this population is typically laden with therapeutic and familial process issues, which, if not handled well, can result in poor outcomes, including early drop out. In addition to delivering the “content” of treatment, practitioners in this field by necessity must direct much of their energy towards monitoring and managing these process and contextual issues.

Fortunately, the complexities inherent to this population have not deterred researchers and an impressive amount of research has amassed during the last quarter of a century. This has resulted in a wide range of available treatments – particularly so for children and preadolescents with conduct problems – that have been well established and tested across a variety of settings, countries, and populations.

The aim of this book is to integrate this considerable body of research into a practicable summary of epidemiology, assessment, and treatment models. We aim to provide the reader with a clear conceptualization of where the research currently stands, while highlighting future research pathways that will facilitate answers to the next generation of questions. In analogous terms, we are poised at the base camp on Everest, and as we look down we can see that huge gains have already been made in this field, primarily with regard to identifying broad risk factors and developing evidence-based treatments. Indeed, many comprehensive treatments are now available that target the wide range of risk factors associated with conduct problems and are tailored to the individual as much as possible. As we look upwards towards the summit, however, we consider whether treatments can be streamlined further. Can we divide this heterogeneous youth population into smaller groups, based on distinct developmental pathways and etiological mechanisms, enabling the development of subtype-specific treatment? Research has already commenced into this exciting arena and an overview of early subtypes is included within this volume. We hope that these discussions will stimulate further questions and encourage research into potential developmental pathways and matching treatment components.

We expect that those who will benefit most from reading this book will be researchers seeking a thought-provoking discussion of the latest knowledge in the field as well as clinicians, both expert and novice, who will find this book a useful reference because it provides both a summary of the current state of knowledge about conduct problems and an

in-depth review of nine major evidence-based treatment interventions. It also includes case study discussions that illustrate practical approaches to treatments, including the management of complex process issues. Mental health specialists and researchers are not the only group, however, who may benefit from this book. It will also serve as a useful resource for policy makers in education and health who want to learn more about gold-standard interventions that may be applicable for them.

For this volume, we have brought together experts, widely considered to be the best thinkers in this field, to deliver state-of-the-art reviews in their respective areas of expertise. An international focus has seen authors enlisted from diverse locations, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To have such outstanding authors contribute to this volume is an enormous privilege, and we thank them sincerely for their dedication and commitment to furthering knowledge in this field.

The volume has been divided into four parts. Part I offers the basic foundation for the subsequent three sections, covering the nature of conduct problems and providing an etiological explanation of these difficulties. In Chap. 1, Wolff and Ollendick offer a comprehensive introduction to the reader by discussing the phenomenology, classification, and epidemiology of conduct problems in youth. The next two chapters focus on etiological mechanisms underlying conduct problems, starting with larger societal explanations and moving through to more individualistic and family-based perspectives. Shoemaker, in Chap. 2, provides us with a sociological perspective on the cause of conduct problems, drawing attention to the many contextual factors (e.g., lack of community integration and stability) in societies that influence antisocial behavior. This reminder of the wider contextual forces at play is complemented by a more individualistic approach to explaining etiology in Chap. 3, in which Kimonis and Frick focus on biological, temperamental, and familial risk factors for the development of conduct problems. In addition, Kimonis and Frick provide an enlightening description of the currently proposed developmental pathways associated with conduct problems. Taken together, this etiological data guides the final chapter of this section by Rhodes and Dadds (Chap. 4), which outlines the assessment of conduct problems, including assessment strategies, tools, process issues, differential diagnosis, and functional analysis.

With this foundation laid, the second section of this volume outlines the evidence-based clinical treatment of conduct problems. In Part II, a loosely consistent format is adopted by all authors, whereby a general introduction about conduct problems is followed by a description of the key features of the treatment model, the content and format of the treatment approach, empirical evidence for the approach, and, lastly, a case study to illustrate the clinical application of the treatment. We start the treatment section by focusing on three evidence-based treatments for children that utilize parent management skills (among other skills) as a core component of treatment. In Chap. 5, Webster-Stratton and Reid give an overview of Incredible Years, a comprehensive treatment program that has developed and evolved over a 30-year period. Next, following a similarly long period of evolution, is Parent–Child Interaction Therapy, an intervention discussed in detail by Eyberg and Bussing in Chap. 6. Finally, in



Chap. 7, McMahon, Long, and Forehand offer an in-depth review of the Helping the Noncompliant Child treatment program.

Moving away from parent management training towards a collaborative problem-solving approach, Greene emphasizes how conduct problems result from poor compatibility or “fit” between a parent and child in Chap. 8. Much is known about parenting styles associated with conduct problems, but Greene makes an important addition to the literature by discussing socioemotional and cognitive deficits in children (e.g., emotional dysregulation, rigid thinking) that, when combined with certain characteristics (e.g., inflexibility) in a parent, may lead to the expression of conduct problems.

Group-based therapy for school children, based on the social cognitive model of aggression, is discussed by Lochman, Boxmeyer, Powell, and Wells in Chap. 9. The Coping Power program, initially devised for youth only, is now complemented by parent groups. The authors in this chapter provide insight into some of the process difficulties associated with group work in this population and how these issues may be overcome.

Next, we review the limited group of treatments that are suitable for older cohorts of youth with complex presentations. In Chap. 10, Alexander and Robbins discuss the clinical application of a family therapy approach, Functional Family Therapy. Similar to Chap. 9, much of the focus in this chapter is directed towards the management of process issues. In Chap. 11, Schaeffer, McCart, Henggeler, and Cunningham describe Multisystemic Therapy, the only therapy that has been validated for adolescents with serious conduct problems who are at risk for out-of-home placement. The authors explain the importance of taking an ecological, community-based approach to the assessment and treatment of serious conduct problems.

In Part III, we consider the effectiveness of treatment for youth with conduct problems, when implemented in three diverse settings. Murrin, in Chap. 12, examines social competency programs for youth in alternative school settings. In Chap. 13, LeBuffe, Robison, and Chamberlin-Elliott review treatment for youth in their residential treatment centers; and, in Chap. 14, Coventry and Swanson consider the effectiveness of wilderness and boot camps for treating antisocial youth. Historically, these treatment options have attracted criticism for their lack of evidence base, but recent advances in research have added to existing knowledge and built evidence for these approaches. These authors analyze the latest evidence and share their conclusions regarding the effectiveness of interventions conducted in these settings. Part III concludes with a discussion by Smith and Coghill (Chap. 15) about the effectiveness of medications as a second-line treatment for the treatment of conduct problems and aggression.

In Part IV of this volume, we look to the future with a consideration of population level prevention strategies, multilevel treatment interventions, evidence-based therapies for minority youth, and program cost-effectiveness. In Chap. 16, the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group reviews the Fast Track treatment program, a large-scale intervention differentiated by its longitudinal format (administered over 10 years), which blends universal and targeted interventions to prevent conduct problems in high-risk youth. Next, in Chap. 17, Sanders and Morawska discuss the Tri-

ple P program, another multilevel prevention program, which also emphasizes the importance of blended interventions. These authors argue that to lower the prevalence of conduct problems population level strategies must be adopted. Universal interventions, such as television documentaries on parenting, would enable widespread access to parenting knowledge and skills for the general population without the stigma associated with more intensive psychological treatments. In Chap. 18, Ho, McCabe, Yeh, and Lau consider whether standard evidence-based therapies can be used in minority populations or if treatments need to be culturally modified before doing so. Finally, Foster, in Chap. 19, argues that all interventions should be analyzed for cost-effectiveness, before going on to discuss the many issues associated with determining the feasibility of treatment programs.

We find ourselves in an enviable position. Practitioners in this field have at their disposal a wealth of evidence-based treatments. Moving forward, we can glimpse the possibility of tailoring these treatments even further, through the identification of distinct etiological pathways. The challenge remains that one day soon, subtypes will be identified and treatment components matched to these subtypes. This is a considerable task, but an exciting one, and one that we hope will propel researchers into action. We are honored to be a part of this process.

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