

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS

What is the skill?

Children gradually develop the ability to manage frustration, solve problems, accept limits, and cooperate with others. These skills depend heavily on repeated experiences of co-regulation with caring adults.

What does normal development look like?

Tantrums, arguing, and impulsive behavior are common during early childhood. As children mature and receive consistent guidance, they increasingly use words instead of behavior to express their needs and emotions.

How does neglect interfere?

Neglect limits opportunities for children to learn emotional regulation and problem-solving skills. When children have not experienced consistent, supportive caregiving, they often rely on aggression, defiance, or emotional outbursts to communicate distress, gain control, or protect themselves from perceived threats.

What might this look like?

Children may argue frequently, refuse directions, become physically aggressive, destroy property, lie, or have explosive emotional reactions to relatively minor frustrations. These behaviors often occur when children feel overwhelmed rather than when they are intentionally trying to be difficult.

Parenting implications

Effective discipline combines clear expectations with empathy and co-regulation. Teaching emotional regulation, providing consistent consequences, and helping children identify feelings are generally more effective than relying solely on punishment.

From Understanding to Attunement

Disruptive behavior is often a child's way of communicating, "I don't yet have the skills to manage what I'm feeling."