

# ACTING OUT: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

## WHY DO KIDS & TEENS ACT OUT?

There are lots of different ways that kids and teens act out. Some of them externalize, by acting aggressively towards others, refusing to do chores around the house, or making a scene. And some of them internalize – by thinking negatively about themselves, which leads them to engage in self-destructive actions like disengaging with school work, giving up easily, or even self-harming.

When kids and teens act in ways that are destructive, they are responding to their own difficult feelings. We can think of it as if their brain has been hijacked - their mind is reacting to something that they have found painful or confusing, and this reaction is dominating their focus. In these moments they won't be able to think clearly about what they are doing or the consequences of their actions.

## HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD CHANGE THE WAY THEY BEHAVE?

The best thing we can do is set boundaries calmly while at the same time validating their emotions and letting them know that we see they are more than the actions they are exhibiting. We can say: "I can see you're struggling and I care about you and how you are. What you are doing is not ok and/or is hurting you – what can we do differently?" This helps them know that you are on their side and want to support them, and at the same time it gives them the opportunity to be accountable and make changes because they are not being shamed, they are being soothed.

## WHAT IF I GET UPSET OR ANGRY BY THEIR ACTIONS?

It's incredibly challenging to remain calm when your child is acting out, because it will most likely trigger your own emotions as well. It may bring up feelings of sadness or shame if they are being cruel to you. It may bring up feelings of fear about whether or not they will ever change. And it may bring up feelings of anger that they are refusing to listen or are being inconsiderate. It's a huge challenge to deal with our own emotions as well as the emotions of others in intense situations, especially in close relationships because we care so much about the relationship and the way the other person sees us. There are some simple strategies listed below that can help you support your own emotions as well as your child's, that will help these interactions become less tense and easier to manage.

## TIPS FOR WHEN YOUR CHILD ACTS OUT:

### 1. TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Before you respond to any reaction your child is having, take a long deep breath. This will give you time to pause and remember how you want to react, and it will also soothe your nervous system so that it is easier to remain calm.

### 2. FOCUS ON THEIR FEELING FIRST

Your child may not be aware of what they are feeling when they are in a reaction. If you can help them name their emotion and let them know that you understand and care about their experience, this will go a long way to helping them calm down.

### 3. FOLLOW THROUGH WITH CONSEQUENCES

If you set consequences that are realistic and then follow through with them every time, this will help your child learn that you are serious when you tell them 'no'.