

Evidence-Based Interventions for Adolescents with Disruptive Behaviors in School-Based Settings



Tarah M. Kuhn, PhD^{a,*}, Jon S. Ebert, PsyD^a, Kathy A. Gracey, MEd^a,
Gabrielle L. Chapman, PhD^b, Richard A. Epstein, PhD, MPH^a

KEYWORDS

• Disruptive behavior disorder • School health • Evidence-based practice

KEY POINTS

- Disruptive behaviors in the classroom are a threat to an optimal learning environment. Educators commonly request assistance managing challenging classroom behaviors and these behaviors are a common reason for referral to mental health services.
- Disruptive behavior disorders (DBDs) commonly co-occur with other conditions, thus making defining a course of treatment more challenging. Not all behavior stems from the same emotional/psychosocial source. Interventions need to be individualized and need to consider the underlying and environmental factors contributing to them.
- The primary factor related to effectiveness of interventions for DBDs in adolescents is quality of implementation. Programs with support and established infrastructure, proper training, and ongoing supervision are more effective at reducing disruptive behavior problems.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 70 million children and adolescents are enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States each year.¹ Elementary and secondary education play a significant role in child and adolescent development. A significant educational task is to create and maintain learning environments that promote optimal learning by providing developmentally appropriate challenges and tasks.²

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^a Department of Psychiatry, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, 1500 21st Avenue South, Village at Vanderbilt, Suite 2200, Nashville, TN 37211, USA; ^b Peabody Research Institute, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, PMB 181, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychiatry, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, 1500 21st Avenue South, Village at Vanderbilt, Suite 2200, Nashville, TN 37211.

E-mail address: tarah.kuhn@vanderbilt.edu

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Abbreviations

AACAP	American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
ADHD	Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
CD	Conduct disorder
DBD	Disruptive behavior disorder
IED	Intermittent explosive disorder
ODD	Oppositional defiant disorder
PSST	Problem-solving skills training

Disruptive behaviors in the classroom are a common threat to optimal learning environment maintenance and it is not surprising that educators commonly request assistance managing challenging classroom behaviors or that these behaviors are a common reason for referral to mental health services.^{3,4} Disruptive behaviors have been shown to impair the school learning environment,⁵ take attention away from other students,⁶ and increase teacher burnout rates.⁷ Teachers who must spend a great deal of time managing challenging classroom behaviors have been shown to have less time for academics and to have students with lower grades and poorer performance on standardized tests.⁸

Disruptive behaviors can include problems, such as defiance, hostility, aggression, and sometimes violence.⁹ Although disruptive behavior problems can occur in students of all ages,¹⁰ adolescence is a developmental stage of particular concern because as youths get older, disruptive behavior can become more tied to delinquency, increased risk for substance use, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and other high-risk behaviors. Also, as youths age, disruptive behaviors become more associated with academic underachievement and truancy.¹¹ Additionally, violence is increasingly prevalent across adolescence,¹² and violence in schools has garnered recent national attention.

There has been an increased recognition by schools of the need to more broadly address students' social and emotional development through the adoption and structuring of social and emotional learning programs that can support the learning of skills needed to be successful.¹³ With this recognition has come an increased focus on assisting students in a more formal way with the development of skills, such as regulating affect, staying focused, and navigating social interactions. Schools have adopted varying levels of intervention, including primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary interventions are focused on prevention that intervenes in behaviors before they become problematic. These are often delivered at a school-wide level. Secondary-level interventions are aimed at addressing problem behaviors before they become severe and are often delivered at a classroom or small group level. Tertiary-level interventions are aimed at youths who have been specifically identified due to problematic behaviors, which are often more intense or frequent and require individualized attention.¹⁴ This clinical review examines existing literature to make recommendations regarding interventions for adolescent disruptive behaviors in school-based settings.

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

DBDs are generally defined by a pattern of behaviors that include violation of societal rules and norms that have a negative impact on functioning in the home, community, or school setting.⁹ DBDs include oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD), intermittent explosive disorder (IED), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).⁹ Criteria for ODD include angry and irritable mood, argumentative and defiant behavior, and vindictiveness. Criteria for CD include aggression and threat of physical harm, deliberate destruction of property, deceitfulness and theft, and serious violation of rules. IED is marked by an inability to control aggressive impulses

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