

What do serious behaviour difficulties look like?

Sam is on a short fuse

Sam, who is eight years old, gets frustrated and angry very easily. He does not like being told what to do. He argues over every little thing. If his parents say no to him, he starts yelling and carrying on. With Sam, it feels like an ongoing battle. Once he is angry, he finds it very difficult to calm down. When he gets like this, it is impossible to reason with him. He has even picked up whatever is nearby and thrown it.

His teacher says Sam can get like this at school too. He wants to have the last say in everything. He even argues with the teacher about what he should do next. Last week, when he was sent to the Principal's office, he swore at the teacher and refused to go.

Sam is lively and always looking for fun but he has trouble making friends. At school, he has been sent in from the playground for fighting quite a few times, but he never believes it is his fault. He thinks others pick on him and treat him unfairly.

When children behave like Sam

When children behave like Sam they are sometimes seen as naughty. Sometimes their parents are blamed for not controlling the child's behaviour. But for some kids, being able to manage feelings and behaviour is much harder than for most. It's as if they are 'on a short fuse'. They react before they think. This gets in the way of them behaving better.

Children who act like Sam often bring out an angry reaction from people around them. They think others are overreacting and then start believing they are being treated unfairly. These children need extra help to learn new skills so that their behaviour changes.

It is important to help children with behavioural difficulties when they are young, because some of those with severe behavioural difficulties in the younger age group will have even greater difficulties in teenage years and adulthood. When children behave like Sam, adults try harder to discipline them. Yet they really need help in learning how to think things through. These children will benefit from learning why rules help them to live in harmony with others so that they can make good choices for themselves.



What you might see in a child with serious behaviour problems

A child with serious behavioural difficulties may...

- argue constantly with adults
- not do as they are told
- provoke others
- use physical aggression to get their own way
- blame others for mistakes.

Parents and carers might notice their child...

- abuses parents, carers and/or school staff
- thinks they're picking on him
- won't help when asked no matter how they try to reason
- thinks up rude names to call people and thinks it's funny
- teases a younger sibling (but hates being teased)
- pushes, hits, kicks parents and carers when angry
- punches a child who accidentally bumps into him or her
- says, "It wasn't me. She started it."

How parents and carers can help

- Remember to emphasise the good things about your child. Keep a record of all the things the child does well each day.
- Review them at the end of each day to remind yourself, as well as your child, of his or her good points and strengths.
- Set house rules. For example, using words not physical fighting.
- Be consistent about the rules you set and make sure that consequences for breaking them are appropriate and fair.
- Reward cooperation and getting on without conflict.
- Use time out (time away from each other) as a consequence for fighting.
- Communicate with the teacher so you can praise your child's school successes.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.

Are you worried that your child is a bit like Sam?

It is hard to tell when a child has a serious behavioural difficulty. Many children get into fights and refuse to do what they are told at times.

Here's how to get help

- Talk with your child's classroom teacher about how your child is managing at school and find out what resources the school can offer.
- Ask to speak to the school psychologist or counsellor.
- Talk to your doctor about the possibility of an assessment and referral to a children's mental health specialist.

It may be a serious behavioural difficulty when

- 1 the child shows the behavioural difficulties far more often than other children of the same age
- 2 these behaviours occur at home, at school and in the neighbourhood
- 3 these behaviours cause difficulties for the child with friends, school staff and family.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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