

What is Juvenile Delinquency?

Children often test the limits and boundaries set by their parents and other authority figures.

Among adolescents some rebelliousness and experimentation is common. However a few children consistently participate in problematic behaviors that negatively affect their family academic social and personal functioning. These children present great concern to parents and the community at large.

Delinquency a legal term for criminal behavior carried out by a juvenile is often the result of escalating problematic behavior. Definitions of delinquency vary among different groups. To alleviate confusion we describe four perspectives on delinquency:

- A Parental View:

Parents may define disruptive and delinquent behavior as disobedience fighting with siblings destroying or damaging property stealing money from family members or threatening parents with violence.

- An Educational View:

School staff members often regard delinquent behavior as that which interrupts or disturbs classroom learning violates the school code of conduct and threatens the safety of faculty and students.

- A Mental Health View:

Mental health professionals consider delinquency to include a wide range of disruptive behaviors that may involve aggression toward others or animals destruction of property deceitfulness theft and violations of curfew and school attendance.

- A Legal System View:

The majority of states and the federal government consider persons under the age of 18 to be juveniles. However when children under this age commit serious crimes (for example murder) they may be prosecuted as adults.

From a juvenile justice perspective delinquent behavior is divided into two categories: "status" offenses and "delinquency" offenses. Status offenses are those acts which would not be considered offenses if committed by an adult; they include acts such as truancy (skipping school) running away alcohol possession or use and curfew violations.

Delinquency offenses involve destruction or theft of property commission of violent crimes against persons illegal weapon possession and possession or sale of illegal drugs.

Prevalence

Many may think that juvenile crime is on the rise but it may actually be declining. According to a 1999 report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) violent juvenile crimes fell steadily from 1995 to 1998 after peaking in 1994 and the arrest rate for violent juvenile crimes declined 30% from 1994 through 1998. (For more information call the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse 1-800-638-8736 or log onto <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>.)

Examples of Juvenile Delinquency Crimes

According to the FBI crimes committed by juvenile delinquents include the following categories:

- Breaking Curfew; Underage drinking; Running away; Vandalism; Motor vehicle theft; Larceny / theft; Burglary; Robbery; Arson

Juvenile Delinquents: Who Are They?

There are no definite predictors that indicate exactly which children will engage in delinquent behavior and activities. However some statistics indicate that girls are arrested less frequently than boys and children from lower socioeconomic levels perpetrate delinquent acts at a higher rate than children from other socioeconomic classes. Nonetheless although social conditions are linked to higher rates of delinquency many youngsters growing up in disadvantaged environments manage to avoid delinquent behavior while some youngsters growing up in advantaged environments engage in delinquent activities.

Age of Onset: Does It Make a Difference?

There are two types of adolescent delinquents: early onset and late onset. Here are lists of characteristics for the two groups:

Early Onset	Late Onset
Symptoms occur early in childhood	Symptoms occur in adolescence
Usually affects males	Affects both males and females
Less effective socialization skills	Greater understanding of norms and standards
Poor peer relationships	Very influential peer group
Families in crisis	Permissive families

Commit more serious and violent crimes Commit less serious crimes

Later become chronic adult offenders Unlikely to violate laws as an adult

(Source: Steinberg L. Adolescence. 1996)

Early-onset delinquents are usually males who have a history of aggression and violent behavior beginning as early as elementary school age. There may be a link to Attention Disorders which are characterized by several symptoms including impulsiveness and to Oppositional & Defiant Behavior which is characterized by aggression and rule-breaking. A significant number of early-onset delinquents have an exaggerated tendency to believe that others have hostile intentions towards them. This belief along with the impulsiveness characteristic of attention disorders may make it extremely difficult for the child or adolescent to appropriately evaluate perceived threats in the environment. This combination frequently leads to conflicts with family members and peers as well as problems adjusting to different school situations.

Early offenders often come from families from low socioeconomic levels in which parents are experiencing crises. Adolescents who begin to exhibit delinquent behavior at an early age may be more likely to go on to commit more serious crimes and become chronic adult offenders.

Late-onset delinquents (that is those who become involved in delinquent behavior during their teenage years) rarely continue this behavior into adulthood. For these juveniles peer pressure is likely to be the biggest factor in their decision to engage in problematic behavior. These adolescents often come from permissive families in which they are given a lot of freedom and are not very closely monitored by the adults who are responsible for them.

Contributing Factors

According to a 1992 journal article by E. M. Scholte there are three main influences on the development of delinquent behavior in adolescents: family peers and school.

- Family:

Family factors which may affect the development of juvenile delinquency include intense and relentless family conflict. Such conflict could be characterized by domestic violence dysfunctional family cohesiveness child abuse and neglect parental inability to express appropriate affection toward a child lack of adequate supervision of a child and rigid and non-democratic child rearing practices.

- Peers:

Adolescence is a stage of development in which acceptance by one's peers becomes extremely important to the juvenile's sense of self-worth. Associating with a circle of friends who exhibit delinquent behaviors and perform delinquent acts increases the risk of non-conformity to social norms as well as deviant and delinquent behaviors.

- School:

Poor academic performance and classroom conduct problems may be predictors of later delinquency. Lack of academic competency creates feelings of alienation worthlessness and low self-esteem. Truancy is often a child's way of dealing with school-related failures.

Delinquent Behavior: Signs and Symptoms

The emergence of behavior problems can be detected as early as age two. Opposition to parents and aggressive behavior with other children are natural developmental pathways for toddlers. These oppositional behaviors typically decline between the ages of 3 and 6 as children acquire the ability to use appropriate speech; this ability facilitates the expression of needs and feelings as well as the resolution of conflict. However failure to develop complementary behaviors such as honesty non-aggression and respect for authority figures may lead to problematic behaviors such as the following:

- Authority Conflict- Stubborn and defiant behavior disobedience to parents and other authority figures skipping classes or not attending school at all and running away from home as a means of avoiding rules and regulations.
- Covert Acts- Lying shoplifting property damage (including vandalism and fire-setting) or more serious forms of property damage such as burglary.
- Overt Acts- Annoying and bullying others physical fighting gang fighting and other violent behaviors such as attacking others with a weapon and sexual assault. If you fear that your child may be heading down a path towards delinquency or is at a high risk for developing these behaviors then keep in mind that prevention is the best solution

Prevention Methods

The prevention of delinquency requires identifying at-risk individuals and their environments before delinquent activity and behavior occur and then removing such risk factors or strengthening resistance to the risk factors already present. The most logical starting place for prevention efforts is the family.

- Build family cohesiveness and parent-child relationships by taking time each week to have fun as a family spending 10-15 minutes alone with your child at least once a week and listening attentively to your child.
- Monitor your child's activities: always ask where your child is going with whom and when your child will be back.
- Set logical rules for behavior according to your child's age and then apply age-appropriate consequences fairly and consistently when the rules are broken.

- Get to know your child's friends and their families.
- Adopt a democratic parenting style by allowing your child's voice to be heard: listen respectfully when your child is talking and make good eye contact at all times.
- Offer to help with academic problems and show concern about your child's studies and behavior in school. At the end of each day ask what went well in school and what problems occurred.
- Talk to your child about peer pressure and the physical and emotional changes expected during the teen years. Calmly explain what you expect from your child in the way of appropriate behavior.
- Assist your child in making good decisions by being a good role model: make good decisions yourself and show your child how to evaluate the consequences of planned and completed behaviors.
- Use natural or logical consequences (rather than punishment) in applying discipline. For example if a child writes on the wall a logical consequence would be for her to scrub the wall clean and paint it.
- Enroll your child in youth recreational activities such as Boys' and Girls' Clubs extra-curricular sports clubs at school and athletic programs run by the YMCA and other well-known non-profit agencies. If the methods stated above are already in place but are not working as effectively as you would like then it may be time to consult a professional. Treatment is the next step.

Treatment Methods

Individual family and group counseling. Job training programs for adolescents such as vocational training. Probation Remember prevention of delinquent behavior is the best way to avoid having to consider methods of treatment! However if your child chooses to engage in delinquent behavior then he must also accept the consequences of those actions. Be firm and consistent.

References

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Adolescence (4th Ed.). Steinberg L. (1996). New York: McGraw-Hill.

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Related Articles - Juvenile Delinquency

[Advocating for your child.](#)

When parents or teachers suspect that a child may have an emotional problem, they should seek a comprehensive evaluation by a mental health professional specifically trained to work with children and adolescents.

[Conduct Disorder](#)

"Conduct disorder" is a complicated group of behavioral and emotional problems in youngsters. Children and adolescents with this disorder have great difficulty following rules and behaving in a socially acceptable way. They are often viewed by other children, adults and social agencies as "bad" or delinquent, rather than mentally ill.

[Children's Threats: When are they serious?](#)

Every year there are tragedies in which children shoot and kill individuals after making threats. When this occurs, everyone asks themselves, "How could this happen?" and "Why didn't we take the threat seriously?"

Juvenile Delinquency Related Web Links

Youth Change: Your Problem-Kid Problem-Solver

www.youthchg.com

The Internet's Largest Source of Solutions to Turnaround Troubled Youth & Children (Serving Youth Professionals and Para-Professionals Only)

Parenting Resources for the 21st Century

<http://parentingresources.ncjrs.org/>

Parenting Resources for the 21st Century links parents and other adults responsible for the care of a child with information on issues covering the full spectrum of parenting. This site, federally sponsored through the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, strives to help families meet the formidable challenges of raising a child today by addressing topics that include school violence, child development, home schooling, organized sports, child abuse, and the juvenile justice system.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. Crime in the United States: Uniform crime reports.
<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

Juvenile Delinquency Related Books and References

[How to Discipline With Love : From Crib...](#)
by Dodson, F.

Great practical ideas and strategies for to use when dealing with children of all ages and stages.
Includes sections on children from nontraditional families.

[The Complete Idiot's Guide to a...](#)
by Lutz, E., & Riera, M. (1999)

Written by a parent for parents, this simple guide shares no-nonsense strategies for every aspect of child raising.

[Positive Discipline for Teenagers:...](#)
by Lott, J.

The authors explain how to resolve conflict in ways that are mutually uplifting. Written for parents, teens, educators, and anyone who loves a teenager.

[Discipline That Works : Promoting...](#)
by Gordon, T.

Author of the best seller, Parent Effectiveness Training, T. Gordon offers an important strategy to help children become more self-reliant, make decisions and control their own behaviors.

[Getting Thru to Kids : Problem Solving...](#)
by Mountrose, P.

Both kids and adults are provided with tips on how to improve listening skills and change behavior patterns of children.

[Before It's Too Late : Why Some Kids Get...](#)
by Stanton E. Samenow

Dr. Samenow explains the six most common mistakes in parental thinking and how to avoid making such mistakes in the future.

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