



Oppositional Defiant Disorder

About oppositional defiant disorder

All children have times when they might refuse to do something they are asked, disrupt others or not listen. Children with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) need support with these behaviours which disrupt their day-to-day life. These students can appear defiant, disobedient, angry and irritable. They might argue with parents, teachers and other students. They may find it hard to follow teachers' instructions. They may lose their temper if they feel like something isn't going their way. Sometimes, it might seem like they annoy other students on purpose, or don't take responsibility for their actions. They might refuse to join in group activities and get out of their seat regularly.

For some students with ODD, reading, writing, maths and concentrating can be hard. Some may also have language delays and find talking about emotions difficult. Students with ODD can have trouble communicating, and making friends. It is also common for students with ODD to have low self-esteem.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Some students will be able to learn and pay attention in the same ways as other children.
- Students with ODD often have a normal working memory. This means they can remember things in their head like images, numbers or several pieces of information at once.
- Many students with ODD are highly motivated by reward systems.
- Students with ODD often enjoy hands-on learning. They may learn new information well through this approach.
- Some students with ODD are creative and enjoy art.

Where you might provide support?

- Students with ODD may need support managing their emotions. They may have temper tantrums, or they may be easily frustrated.
- They may find it hard to follow instructions and rules, which can be disruptive for class time, excursions, and activities like physical education.



- Students with ODD may have trouble making and keeping friends. They sometimes have trouble communicating and may find it hard to understand social situations. This can also impact their self-esteem.
- They may find problem solving hard. This can make schoolwork difficult, particularly as they may get frustrated easily. Finding it difficult to understand a problem or conversation is often a reason for emotional outbursts.
- Students with ODD might not be able understand the consequences of a behaviour. They might distract another student in class without thinking about the other student, the class or what the teacher might say.

Evidence-based strategies

Provide a positive environment

- **Use lots of praise.** Praising students often for positive behaviours can build confidence and reduce disruptive and challenging behaviour. This might include praise for staying focused, interacting well with others and listening to teachers. Praise can be given both individually and for others to hear.
- **Provide a warm and nurturing environment.** A warm and supportive role model can help students learn how to have good interpersonal relationships. Look for ways to model to students how to get along with others.
- **Use a reward system.** Punishment may not lead to changes in challenging behaviour. Instead, rewards/encouragement can be given for positive behaviours. Behaviour charts with stickers help students see their progress. Students may be more motivated if they can choose their favourite reward like a sticker, game or book.

Be proactive

- **Set clear classroom rules.** Explaining the classroom rules at the start of a year or term can be helpful. Clear and simple are best (e.g. “Raise your hand before you speak”, “Keep your hands to yourself”). Teaching students why a rule is important, including how breaking a rule impacts others, may lead to more positive behaviour.



Build a child's skillset

- **Strengthen students' social skills.** Some students with ODD may find it hard to know how to get along with others. Consider coaching them with social skills, such as how to share, apologise and agree with others, and how to have a conversation (e.g. listening, letting the other person talk, waiting their turn to talk). Opportunities to practise these skills may help. You can find other general social skills strategies on the social functioning page.
- **Help students build positive relationships.** Positive relationships between students with ODD and teachers may help them with cooperation, motivation and learning. Connecting with students and managing frustrations with past challenging behaviour can help build a positive relationship.
- **Talk with students about feelings.** A "feelings thermometer" on the wall can help students communicate how they are feeling without using words. Feelings card games help students learn what emotions look like.
- **Help students to manage their emotions.** If a student gets angry or has an emotional outburst, they can take steps to calm down. Encourage them to recognise a feeling, pause, take a breath, and tell themselves to calm down or use other strategies like counting to 10. Get them to think about why they became emotional once they have calmed down.
- **Teach students how to relax.** Learning simple ways to relax may help students with ODD manage their emotions. Watch an example of a breathing and relaxation exercise on the teacher resources page.
- **Encourage students to problem solve.** Helping students learn to problem solve can help them persist with school work instead of getting frustrated. For example, help students identify a problem, think of possible solutions, choose the best solution, and think about if the solution worked. When students are learning how to problem solve, giving them appropriate options to choose from may be helpful.

Collaborate with parents

- **Build strong home-school bonds.** Consider involving parents through regular positive phone calls, parent-teacher interviews and homework which needs signing.
- **Use a home-school note system.** Send positive notes home in a students' diary for positive behaviour at school so their family can encourage them at home. These notes could describe the positive behaviour for the parent to understand.



Best practice tips

Consider your tone

- Children may respond well to a neutral tone for instructions, and a positive tone for praise. Avoid yelling or sarcasm.

Have a clear and predictable schedule

- Children with ODD are less likely to be disruptive when they know what to expect. Consider having a visual schedule on the wall and letting a child know if there are going to be any changes.

Curriculum considerations

The Arts

- Some students with ODD might have creative strengths. They may be very motivated and interested in the arts. It may be a great place to encourage positive behaviour, friendships and self-esteem.
- The arts curriculum can be a place for students with ODD to learn listening and sharing skills, and talk about emotions (e.g. “How did that sound make you feel?”)
- Some students may be more distracted or disruptive in classrooms outside of their normal learning space. Strategies that could help include having a clear schedule.
- Refer to to [AllPlay Dance](#) for further strategies for dance

English

- Some students may find reading and writing challenging. This may lead to frustration and low self-esteem. Refer to information about [specific learning disability](#) to come up with reading/writing strategies for the student.
- If students are disrupting the class, it is possible they are finding a task difficult. This is a good opportunity to learn what the student finds hard, and to build their problem solving skills.



Health and Physical Education

- Physical Education classes contain many new distractions for students with ODD such as balls, bats and racquets.
- Consider choosing teams for students so that students with ODD are not left out.
- Physical Education classes can be a good way for students with ODD to let out some energy.
- Refer to [AllPlay Footy](#) for further strategies for sports/football.
- Refer to [AllPlay Dance](#) for further strategies for dance.

The Humanities

- Students with ODD might find reading and writing challenging. Consider tailoring your approach to include activities that do not involve a lot of reading and writing.

Languages

- Language classes might have challenging problems to solve, and a lot of reading and writing, all of which can be challenging for students with ODD. Consider tailoring your approach to a student's strengths.

Mathematics

- Students with ODD can find mathematics challenging if they struggle to focus or problem solve. This can lead to frustration and low self-esteem.
- Consider tailoring your approach to a child's strengths. Refer to information about [specific learning disabilities](#) to come up with mathematics strategies for the student.

Science

- Science classes might have challenging problems to solve, and a lot of reading and writing, all of which can be challenging for students with ODD. Consider tailoring your approach to a child's strengths.

Technologies

- Students with ODD might be easily distracted by computers and touch devices, especially if they do not use them regularly.



Other considerations

Safety

- Children with challenging behaviour might engage in risky behaviours more often than other children.
- Some children may refuse to follow rules and instructions. This can put themselves or others in danger.
- Remind children of the rules to keep them safe.
- Use positive language and a neutral tone when giving instructions, like telling students what to do instead of what not to do.

First aid

- Some students may engage in challenging behaviours when teachers are applying first aid.
- Use a neutral tone, and explain clearly and simply what you are going to do, such as when applying a band aid.

Safety drills

- Some students may engage in disruptive behaviour during emergency drills. Clear and simple instructions on the procedure may help.

Behaviour

- Some students might also show challenging behaviours towards other students. It's important to remember children are most likely trying to communicate a need or want that is not being met.
- Strategies under 'build their skillset' might help, such as building social skills and emotional regulation.
- Try to 'help students build positive environments', and 'create a warm and nurturing environment'.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.



Relief teachers

- Some students may engage in challenging behaviours with new teachers or support staff. Having a clear schedule may help avoid disruptive behaviour.
- When possible, let children know when relief staff are coming.
- Stick to routines as much as possible. Talk to relief teachers about the strategies you use, so they can continue using them.

Friendships

- Some students with ODD may have trouble getting along with other students. They might find it hard to make friends, and they may be left out.
- Help students build [social skills](#).

Homework

- Students with ODD might find homework challenging. An effective homework routine may be helpful for them. Some children may refuse to complete work if they are feeling forced. Allowing them to feel in control of their own work through providing choices may help.

Excursions/camps

- Excursions and camps may be challenging for students with ODD as there are likely to be new distractions, and a change in routine.
- Consider safety when planning an excursion if a student struggles to follow instructions or is likely to be impulsive.

Language delays

- Some students with ODD might have language delays. Some students with ODD may have a limited vocabulary, and not know words to describe how they are feeling.
- Visit our section on [specific learning disorders](#) for specific strategies.



Wellbeing

- Students with ODD may develop feelings of depression. This can impact their schoolwork and relationships. Watch for changes in behaviour and consider referring a student to the school's wellbeing staff if indicated.
- A relevant tip is 'help students to manage their emotions'.

Transitions

- A child with ODD may benefit from supports when moving across education settings
- Keep parents informed of what is happening in the transition period.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Students with ODD may also experience [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder](#), [anxiety](#) or a [specific learning disability](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with oppositional defiant disorder include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Class schedule
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Student self-monitoring form
- Problem solving guide
- AllPlay Learn story - When my teacher is away
- AllPlay Learn Story - Going on an excursion