

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

About oppositional defiant disorder

All teenagers have times when they might refuse to do something they are asked, disrupt others or not listen. Teens 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 others.
- 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 be easily frustrated or angered.
- 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

Help students to manage their emotions

- Sometimes students may be angry or frustrated because they don't know what to do when they feel stressed, worried or afraid. Encouraging students to name and express their feelings in a safe environment, such as with a teacher, can help. If a student gets angry or has an emotional outburst, encourage them to recognise what they are feeling, pause, take a breath, and tell themselves to calm down or use another calming down strategy. Help them to think about why they became emotional once they have calmed down.

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 whether the solution worked.

Best practice tips

Provide a positive environment

- **Use a lot 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. Positive relationships may help students with cooperation, motivation and learning. Connecting with students and managing frustrations with past challenging behaviour can help build a positive relationship.
- **Use a reward system.** Punishment may not lead to changes in challenging behaviour. Instead, rewards/encouragement can be given for positive behaviours. Students may be more motivated if they can choose their favourite reward like computer time, a class game, a book, or working outside.

Be proactive

- **Set clear classroom rules.** Explaining the classroom rules at the start of a year or term can be helpful. Clear and simple rules 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.
- **Have a clear and predictable schedule.** Students with ODD are less likely to be disruptive when they know what to expect. Consider having a visual schedule for students and letting a student know if there are going to be any changes. Remind them to check their timetables regularly.

Build their skillset

- **Strengthen students’ social skills.** Students with ODD may find it hard to know how to get along with others. Consider teaching them how to be respectful, how to join groups and how to have conversations (e.g. listening, letting the other person talk, waiting their turn to talk). You can access further strategies for social skills on our [social skills](#) page.
- **Teach students how to relax.** Learning simple ways to relax may help students with ODD manage their emotions. You can watch an example of a breathing and relaxation exercise in a primary school setting on our [primary teacher resources](#) page.

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 the student can receive encouragement at home. These notes could describe the positive behaviour for the parent to understand.

Adapt your response to students' behaviour

- **Ignore small challenging behaviours.** Small amounts of challenging behaviour can be reduced by simply ignoring them, as this removes students' motivation to continue the behaviour if attention was the goal.
- **Consider your tone.** Students may respond well to a neutral tone for instructions, and a positive tone for praise. Avoid yelling or sarcasm.

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 [AllPlay Dance](#) for further strategies for dance.

English

- Students may find reading and writing challenging. This may lead to frustration and low self-esteem. Refer to information about [specific learning disabilities](#) 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 [AllPlay Footy](#) for further strategies for sports/football.
- Refer [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 may 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 student's strengths. Refer to information about [specific learning disabilities](#) to access 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 student'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

- Teens with challenging behaviour might engage in risky behaviours more often than others.
- Some may refuse to follow rules and instructions. This can put themselves or others in danger.
- Remind students of the rules to keep them safe.
- Use positive language and a neutral tone when giving instructions. Tell 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 to help them with an injury or sickness.

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 others students. It's important to remember they 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 young person and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a young person 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 students 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.
- As assignments get bigger, students with ODD may need to be taught how to plan and organise their time and work.
- Some students 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 and 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.

Wellbeing

- Students with ODD may develop feelings of depression. This can impact their schoolwork and relationships. Substance use may be more common amongst students with ODD.
- Watch for changes in behaviour and consider referring a student to the school's wellbeing staff if indicated.
- Refer 'help students to manage their emotions'.
- Transitions
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning across education settings, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).



- Post-school transition to adult life should begin as early as possible in school.
- Consider strategies that increase independence, such as working on their organisational, social and problem-solving skills, time- and self- management skills. Plenty of opportunities to practise them in all areas of the student's life may also be helpful.
- It may be helpful to identify skill gaps and develop a support plan to help them be successful (e.g. social skills, academic and/or employment skills).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Teenagers with oppositional defiant disorder may also experience [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [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 students with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for students with oppositional defiant disorder include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Student self-monitoring form
- Problem solving guide