

Bossy Behavior

Is your child acting bossy?



Is your child:

- Telling people what to do?
- Not playing nice in the sandbox?
- Always bossing everyone else around?
- Having difficulty sharing toys with other children?
- Always saying, “that one’s mine!”?
- Struggling to give up control?
- Having challenges getting along with others because of a need to be in charge?

LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

Some children always need to be in control. They regularly insist on telling other children and adults what to do. They insist on their own way. These kids may prefer to play alone than to have to play by someone else’s rules. At school or on the playground, perhaps you hear words like “he’s bossy,” “he’s mean” or “he can’t play with us.” When playing with toys, the dialogue may go something like this.

“No mommy, I’m first. I get to be the blue guy.” “I am the ruler of this planet!” “No, that guy is mine too- and then I hit your guy, okay? And he falls to Earth. But no, he can’t get up yet; you have to just leave him there. Now you tell me I won. Say, ‘oh no!’ Okay, mommy? You say that now.” Your child is the narrator, and the main character, and the hero, and the winner, of every game.

Although it is normal to want your own way sometimes, some children really are unable to tolerate it when someone else is in charge. This difficulty can interfere with play and with social relationships; other kids may not want to play with a bossy playmate. This rigidity can also lead to anxiety for a child when things don’t go as planned.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

Gifted: Children who are bright, very outgoing and take a mothering attitude to other children may be bossy. Sometimes, a 'mother hen' child will take on the role of peer model for a struggling classmate. This can be okay so long as the other child appreciates the support. In that case, it will be important to ask the teacher to keep an eye on the situation. On the other hand, sometimes a very smart child decides to dominate and control other kids. If it works, and he gets his way, it will be reinforcing to boss around other children and perhaps adults. This situation requires intervention.

Anxiety: Anxiety is marked by uncertainty and fear about the world and worries about what will happen next. Often, anxious children are rigid in order to exert some level of control over their environment. Anxious children could appear restless and unfocused when worried; they may have nightmares or poor sleep. They might have trouble separating from parents or be slow to warm up in new situations.

Rigidity could also be the underlying problem here. The executive function of 'flexibility' refers to the ability to adapt to changes in the environment. Some youngsters are inflexible and struggle to give up control or to play by other’s rules.

Children with autism tend to be rigid; often wanting to have things their own way. This rigidity is related to difficulty in taking the perspective of another child or adult. If a child is not considering another child’s feelings, he or she might insist on a certain preference without realizing the impact this rigidity may have on others. Also, being bossy provides a child with autism a way to be in control. Control provides predictability, so statements like 'I always sit here', or 'I always do it this way,' provide comfort because of the structure and routine that results.

Behavior: bossiness may be a strategy your child is using to get his way. *Defiant behavior* may simply be reinforced by the environment. If your child can hit another child and walk away with the toy he likes each time, then defiance or aggression is reinforced. Sometimes, children use bossy behavior to have power, control, and get what they want. In this case, parents will want to seek help from a professional.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS BOSSY

If your child is bossy, rigid, anxious or defiant, things can get challenging. Try to maintain a schedule that is predictable when you can. Bedtime, mealtime, bath time and these routines should be as consistent as possible.

However, it is also helpful to build some flexibility into your day. Offer choices for activities to change things up. With playdates, work with your child to plan a few choices for activities and to plan to let the friend choose. Have limited free play, and suggest a structure for turn taking during free play time.

When possible, give your child choices that you feel comfortable with accepting. “We are going to have dinner now, and you can choose to sit next to me or to dad.” “Would you like to have broccoli or carrots as your vegetable?”

As your child enters school age, offer feedback on social interactions, and invite your child to think about how his peer felt when he was bossed around. Model your own feelings for your children in appropriate ways: “I’m feeling angry so I’m going to take a walk and breathe for a few minutes.”

An evaluation will help you determine if the bossy behavior is covering an underlying anxiety disorder or autism or if the behavior itself is the issue. Having more understanding into whether or not there is anxiety to treat will help you with parenting strategies as you decide how to react to these behaviors.

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Social problems \(Socializing\)](#): if your child does not see that being bossy hurts others’ feelings, he or she may tend to focus more on getting his or her way. Some children have difficulty with social perspective taking, with understanding what reactions are appropriate in a situation, and with reading other people’s reactions
- [General anxiety](#) or [social anxiety](#): if your child is bossy it may be due to anxiety. Some children are irritable and restless because of underlying feelings of worry and anxiety
- [Rigid behavior](#): if your child is bossy, it is important to consider whether your child is exceptionally rigid. Does he or she struggle with transitions, tantrum if he can’t eat off the blue plate, assign seats at the dinner table and throw a tantrum if you sit in the wrong place? Inflexibility can be a sign of autism or anxiety

- [Aggression](#) or [Non-compliance](#): if your child is bossy, it may be a behavior problem. Some children are being reinforced for these bad behaviors by getting what they want. For example, if I hit my sister, she will drop the toy I want. This is a sign of trouble and parents will want to seek help in a situation like this

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Gifted](#): many gifted children have a tendency to be very intense and insist on doing things their own way. Giftedness is not a disability but these children have some unique needs. They may struggle to work in groups because they think their own ideas are the best and will not listen to peer
- [Behavior Disorders](#): behavior problems that are created by the accidental reinforcement of bad behaviors. If being bossy or rigid is rewarded by getting that toy, these behaviors will increase
- [Anxiety Disorders](#): excessive stress and worry, restlessness, trouble sleeping, which are lessened when the child is in control of a situation
- [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder](#): obsessive thoughts that lead to compulsive behaviors that can be repetitive and lessen the anxiety. Control is a huge factor here
- [Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder \(DMDD\)](#): depressed mood or, in children, irritability that is pervasive; leads to behavioral outbursts or behavior challenges that are rooted in depression
- [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#): deficits in social communication and restricted interests or behaviors; challenges with social perspective taking or seeing another's view; leads to rigid and inflexible need for routine and difficulty with change or with giving up control
- [Trauma and Attachment Disorders](#): rigidity and extreme behaviors that stem from a history of traumatic experiences or attachment to primary caregivers (death of a parent, change of caregivers, or abuse)

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child or to *consult 'live'* with a licensed psychologist
- [Psychotherapist or Play Therapist](#): to treat emotional symptoms that arise and help with social skills training and organization
- [ABA Therapist](#): to assess and treat behavior; may conduct a functional analysis and develop a behavior plan that can guide treatment
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider a full assessment and to consider symptoms in mental health and/or behavioral context
- [Psychiatrist](#): to prescribe and manage psychotropic medication and consider medical issues that could be involved in your child's mental health

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [Roberts, BASC-3, Clinical Interview, RCMAS, CDI-2, Human Figure Drawing, PTSD Scale, Rorschach, Brief Projective Measures](#): emotional assessment (Neuropsychological or psychological evaluation)
- [WISC-V](#): cognitive assessment (Psychological or School Psychological evaluation)
- [ADOS-2; Social Responsiveness Scale \(SRS\) for parents or teachers](#): assessment of challenges in social reciprocity, inflexibility, and need for control that indicate an autism diagnosis should be considered (Neuropsychological or Psychological evaluation)

LEARN MORE

[1] Seligman, Martin E. P. (2007) *The Optimistic Child The Optimistic Child: A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Optimistic-Child-Safeguard-Depression-Resilience/dp/0618918094/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1475980449&sr=8-1&keywords=optimistic+child

[2] Huebner, Dawn. (2005). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety.*

Amazon.com: https://www.amazon.com/What-When-You-Worry-Much/dp/1591473144/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1468762679&sr=1-1&keywords=what+to+do+when+you+worry+too+much

[3] Kroncke, Anna P., & Willard, Marcy & Huckabee, Helena (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings*. Springer, San Francisco.

Springer: <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319255026>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/>

[4] Peters, Daniel, B. (2013). *From worrier to warrior: A guide to conquering your fears*.

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Worrier-Warrior-Guide-Conquering-Fears/dp/1935067249/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1468762611&sr=8-1&keywords=from+worrier+to+warrior

[5] Foxman, Paul (2003). *Recognizing anxiety in children and helping them heal*.

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Worried-Child-Recognizing-Anxiety-Children/dp/0897934202/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1468345355&sr=8-1&keywords=the+worried+child

[6] Papolos, Demetri & Papolos, Janice (2002). *The Bipolar Child: The definitive and reassuring guide to childhood's most understood disorder*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Bipolar-Child-Definitive-Reassuring-Misunderstood/dp/0767928601>

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