

Acting Out Encyclopedia Article

Acting Out

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Acting Out

A defense mechanism whereby an individual expresses feelings through behavior rather than word.

The term "acting out" was first coined to describe the behavior exhibited by a patient in expressing inner feelings about his or her psychoanalyst in a psychotherapy session. By the mid-1990s, the expression had acquired a broader definition, and was used to describe any situation where an individual's behavior seemed to reflect the expression of unconscious feelings or conflicts in actions rather than words. Acting out behavior may range from mildly disruptive in a preschool or home setting to dangerous, such as self-harm or suicidal gestures. In children, acting out may result in social isolation and limit his or her ability to engage in and learn from new experiences.

Children may act out as a way to express powerful, painful, and/or confusing feelings that they are unable to verbalize. Parents and teachers dealing with acting out behavior often select a two-pronged approach, depending upon the severity of the situation. The first strategy is aimed at managing the behavior itself: the adult helps the child to learn to substitute an acceptable behavior as an expression of his or her feelings. Secondly, the adult may want to support the child in investigating and dealing with the feelings he or she is expressing in acting out behavior. This investigation often requires the guidance of a trained child psychologist or psychotherapist.

For Further Study

Books

Firestone, Robert W., and Joyce Catlett. *Psychological Defenses in Everyday Life*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1989.

Kernberg, Paulina F., and Saralea E. Chazan. *Children with Conduct Disorders: A Psychotherapy Manual* New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Toth, Michele. *Understanding and Treating Conduct Disorders*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, 1990.

Periodicals

Yorke, Clifford. "Childhood and the Unconscious." *American Imago* 53, Fall 1996, pp. 227+.