

"The Myth of the Bad Kid"

Six-year-old Jimmy is having trouble in school. As a first grader, he already has a reputation among the teachers as a "bad kid." He spends most of his school day sitting in the corner or the principal's office. With 30 other children in his class, the teacher has little time for Jimmy. He isn't learning anything in the classroom, and he has trouble making friends.

We all have memories of the "bad kid" in our class - the child who was always in trouble and often alone. We tend to blame this kind of behavior on a lack of discipline or a bad home. We say the child was spoiled, abused, or "just trying to get attention." But these labels are often misguided. Many of these children suffer from serious emotional problems that are not the fault of their caregivers or themselves.

Myths about children's behavior make it easy to play the "blame game" instead of trying to help children like Jimmy. Often, in making assumptions, we "write off" some children. However, with understanding, attention and appropriate mental health services, many children can succeed - they can have friends, join in activities and grow up to lead productive lives. To help children with emotional problems realize their potential, we must first learn the facts about the "bad kid."

- **Children do not misbehave or fail in school just to get attention.** Behavior problems can be symptoms of emotional, behavioral or mental disorders, rather than merely attention-seeking devices. These children can succeed in school with understanding, attention and appropriate mental health services.
- **Behavioral problems in children can be due to a combination of factors.** Research shows that many factors contribute to children's emotional problems including genetics, trauma and stress. While these problems are sometimes due to poor parenting or abuse, parents and family are more often a child's greatest source of emotional support.
- **Children's emotional, behavioral and mental disorders affect millions of American families.** An estimated 14-20 percent of all children have some type of mental health problem. Jimmy and the many others mislabeled as "bad kids" can use the support of their communities.

For more information on children's emotional and behavioral problems, call the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, one of the Public Health Service agencies in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at 1-800-789-2647.