

The difficult child – Ideas about reactions, communication, role-modeling

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Periodically, some parents may experience their child being what many would call difficult or defiant.

The child may kick and scream as a reaction to your discipline or become completely withdrawn, stubborn and refuse any sort of repercussions to whatever punishment is put in place. The child may even become destructive and make threats to their parents or other adults in their life.

The word “no” is probably the child’s favorite and they most likely see themselves as being in the same place of power in the family as their parents. This child may not only be difficult and make their parents want to pull their hair out, but this child’s defiance may actually be considered to be more serious than the average child who tests the limits by talking back with a smart remark every so often.

This child may have what is known as oppositional defiant disorder or ODD. In this article, we will look at what a parent can do if you have a difficult child or a child with ODD.

Are you really listening?

Today, it is so incredibly easy to become distracted and time management can be an incredible struggle. We have truly become extreme multi-taskers, with our lives being so tied to things like Facebook and whatever the Kardashians are doing that we have forgotten how to truly listen to each other.

I will admit that when I am having a conversation with someone, my ever-filling email inbox and my Facebook wall are periodically, and eerily subconsciously, in the back of my mind. I cannot even imagine how one balances this life as a parent with a defiant child.

I am lucky enough to have some very well-behaved children in my family, but even so, when my angel-of-a-3-year-old niece decides she wants to wear a coat other than the one my sister so precisely selected, it sets us back at least 30 minutes. We then have to figure out what it is that is truly bothering her and attempt to solve the problem. For a defiant child, a tantrum could literally last all day.

The first thing I advise anyone to do in a situation where a child has become defiant is to take a step back, look at yourself and listen. Really examine how you are communicating, reacting to the situation and thinking.

What seems to be triggering the outburst or episode from your child? Is it in your approach? Look at what your demeanor is, does your blood pressure rise and do you begin to speak with a louder tone?

In a situation where you feel things are getting out of control, the first thing that can be controlled is how you react and how you handle the situation. Begin to listen to your body and how you advance the situation with your child. This may be just the start, but once you are aware of yourself, you then will begin to be able to control the outcome of the situation more gracefully.

If the child is an adolescent or teenager, talk to them in more of a general

sense instead of directing all faults at them. Take note of other children their age and ask the child to observe these other children’s defiant behaviors. Ask your child what those children did wrong to get them into trouble. Allow the child to observe the actions and the consequences that the other oppositional children will face.

It is helpful to ask the child to predict what might happen if the child decides to repeat this negative deed again. This will encourage the child to think more critically about their own decision making and begin looking at consequences in a way they can relate to.

Communication is truly imperative in understanding any child, especially the ODD child. A defiant child often will be extremely difficult to talk to, which makes solving the underlying problem seem impossible.

Some children may say things like, “I don’t care if I am grounded, I’ll just leave anyway. You can’t stop me.” Or if you ask them any sort of question, they may consistently respond with, “I don’t know.” If these things are true, parents must remain calm and let the child know that you mean business.

Parents may need to take away privileges, such as phone, computer and TV access. In some cases, parents have found they have to take away everything. When the child acts positively, the parents would allow the child gradual access to their privileges. In this approach, the more cooperative and positive the child is, the more freedom they receive.

With the oppositional child, things are often seemingly backward and instead of taking away privileges for negative behaviors, which typically works as discipline for the average child, the oppositional child may feel empowered by frustrating their parents.

One approach that some parents have found is to look for the child being good and really praise the child. Even during times in which the child is being defiant, there are positive aspects that can be noticed and praised.

It very well might surprise the child that you are not reacting with anger but in a pleasant manner and this will take the excitement away from the heated engagement they are anticipating. Eventually, hearing more praise will become normal for the child (remember this is the child who is used to being reprimanded daily) and this can cause the child’s self-esteem to change.

The child will begin to believe they are “good” instead of “bad.” This alteration of one’s self-perspective can be life-changing as it has the potential to modify the child’s self-fulfilling prophecy.

Is there chaos in the home?

Imagine your family is a building project, perhaps a bridge to be more specific. Now, if one goes into leading a bridge-building project all willy-nilly and everyone in the company just starts putting things together like tinker toys, without delegating who is doing what job, then the chances of you ending up with something uncross-able are pretty high.

This is true for family dynamics as well. If a family is lacking stability, the family could fall, including the children. I like to picture family structure in a visual way and in the book *The Defiant Child* by Dr. Douglas A. Riley, there is a wonderful mental picture of this idea when he states, “Structure is best visualized as a corral, a large fence that encircles a child and reminds her of an ongoing basis of acceptable limits of behavior.”

The book also states that the healthiest type of structure is a flexible one. A flexible structure has defined limitations but can be adjusted, given particular situations. This is an approach that everyone in the family can benefit from. A child should have tremendous support and the limitations should be tightened when a child is misbehaving and loosened when a child is on track

Consistency needs to be across the board, from parent to parent. Parents need to have an understanding of the rules and create those rules together. Better yet, if parents and children can develop the rules and consequences together, then everyone has an understanding of what the rules are, which does not leave room for any surprises.

There should not be a “good cop/bad cop” dynamic between parents; each rule should be agreed upon. The fear of the unknown can be a serious anxiety-provoking trigger, which can lead to acting out and meltdowns in young children.

Having rules that everyone understands can help ease these anxieties and children are less likely to argue. This means that rules need not be too complex for children and punishments must correlate with the negative action they committed. Being uncertain of what may come can cause anyone to feel uneasy and is a cause for some children to not take their parents or their parents’ rules seriously.

The way in which parents interact with each other also is imperative to a healthy, stable home. If a couple cannot speak to each other in a respectful manner, why would the children be expected to speak to each other, to their parents or anyone else in such a way?

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Role-modeling respect and proper communication is a key way to teaching our children to be the people we wish them to be. Parents are a child’s primary teacher, so having a teacher who can model healthy relationships can make a tremendous difference on a child’s behavior and later outcomes in life.

Friend selection has an enormous impact on a child’s behaviors as well, particularly because the defiant child is often attracted to other defiant children.

To aid in the development of healthy friendships, parents ought not to tell their child that they cannot be friends with their regular friends, but rather encourage the child to explore making friends in other groups by encouraging the child to get involved in various group activities, like sports or school clubs. I promote all parents to get to know your child’s friends and their families as much as possible because friends play a significant role in exposing positive and negative influences.

For every age range of children with ODD, it is important to remember that consistency on all levels is the most important foundation for positive behavior. For all children, there are a series of steps that can help a parent or guardian get through to their children.

The steps include communication, warnings, and restrictions and privileges removed and awarded. One of the most difficult parts of encouraging a child to move from a defiant level of behavior to that of a more healthy level of behavior is to hone in on the child’s potential and to be aware of the parenting measures that could be characterized as enabling their negative behaviors.

Being present in a child’s life can make all the difference. Sometimes there may be an underlying problem, such as undiagnosed ADD/ADHD, learning disabilities, depression and many other psychological conditions.

Working with your child to move away from defiant behavior is very much a process and will not be fixed overnight. This type of change takes a great deal of patience and consistency. The most important thing to remember is to not give up and to look at the long-term goal, which is to raise a happy, healthy and cooperative child.

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