

Staying out of Power Struggles with Oppositional Students



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Fort Defiance



The Commander of Fort Defiance



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Not all problem behaviors are a problem

- Defiance is normal and necessary for development of independence. A little push back is a good thing.
- Independence and determination on steroids.
– “CCR” (Childhood CEO Syndrome)
- The converse is a problem
– “DDD” (Defiance Deficit Disorder – aka Separation Anxiety)

What is oppositional-defiance?



Facets of Oppositional-Defiance (aka the biopsychosocial model)

- 1. Temperament is biological
- 2. Behaviors are learned



- 3. Behaviors occur in context of relationships
- We will talk about each of these**

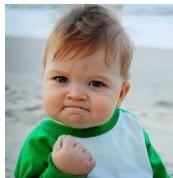
Temperament

- Reactive and controlling
- Easily frustrated
- High tolerance for negative consequences
- Some evidence of anatomic differences in brain structure related to executive function (Noordermeer SD et al, Neuropsychology Review, 2016 Mar; 26(1):44-72)



D “Which one of these is not like the others?”

- Parents: are your kids the same?
- How long did it take to recognize their temperamental differences?
- Teachers: Do the same motivators work for all your students?
- What are you motivated by?



Theory of Motivational Needs

(McClelland, et al.)

- Desire for affiliation: to be accepted by others, to interact socially
- Desire for achievement: drive to excel, to improve on past performance
- Need for power: motivated to have influence

C ODD is also learned behavior

- Learn that negative behaviors are useful for control and avoidance
- Faulty thinking - It's your fault not mine, you don't understand, or it wasn't that bad
- "Fairness" is a guiding principle

And, it occurs in context of relationships

- Mismatch between adult and child temperaments/personality
- Behavioral transaction. It's a two way street. Child behavior causes adult behavior and vice versa



- Coercion theory (Gerald Patterson)

Child's version of DSM-5 criteria for ODD –emphasis added

- I often lose my temper **because it works.**
- I am often touchy and annoyed **because it gets me what I want.**
- I am often angry **because nothing ever seems fair.**
- I often argue **because it gives me control.**
- I often defy requests **because I don't like doing boring things.**
- I often deliberately annoy other's **because they give in.**
- I often blame others **to avoid consequences.**
- I am sometimes vindictive **because frustration is a good pay back.**

Risk factors for worsening conduct problems – partial list

- Early onset (1 CD behavior prior to age 10)
- Presence of overt and covert behaviors (Loeber). Proactive aggression (Dodge)
- Neuropathic signs – e.g., animal maltreatment and limited prosocial emotions – lack of remorse, callous/lack of empathy, unconcerned about performance, and shallow affect
- Family functioning – e.g., poor monitoring
- Co-occurring Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, combined presentation or other neurodevelopmental disorder (e.g., FASD)

Conduct Disorder DSM 5 criteria

3 of 15 criteria in past 12 months and at least 1 in 6 months

- 1) Aggression to people and animals
- 2) Destruction of property
- 3) Deceitfulness or theft
- 4) Serious violations of rules



Childhood and adolescent onset types

Complicating conditions

- Autism Spectrum Disorders
 - Cognitive versus behavioral rigidity
 - Sensory processing differences
 - Purpose of “defiance” might be protesting change or sensory overload
- Depression
 - Self-fulfilling prophesy
 - Less responsive to positive consequences – you’re lying and I’m hopeless
 - Less responsive to negative consequences – I’m already miserable

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Reactive Attachment Disorder

- Trauma changes neurology.
- Purpose of behavior is protection and avoidance in response to feeling unsafe. Need to restore a sense of safety
- Have a low threshold for feeling threatened
- Reactions might be “survival” behaviors – “fight, flight, or freeze”. Might dissociate.
- Not simply angry – mood might include elements of fear/panic and hopeless despair.

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Oppositional youth have an obvious and not so obvious problem

- Easily observed is their defiant and confrontational behavior.
- Less obvious is that they are growing up too fast.
- They have assumed an adult role in their family and their world.
- To some degree they are carrying adult-sized emotional responsibilities.
- They confuse love and control.
- They are not happy.

They seek power in all relationships.

- A child cannot occupy an adult-like position in his or her social system and feel loved at the same time. The longer children fail to feel loved, the more abusive their behavior becomes.



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Treating oppositional behavior:

So what works?

Evidence-based interventions – The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare – www.cebc4cw.org

- A few examples of “well supported” programs for behavioral problems
 - The Incredible Years
 - Oregon Model
 - Parent Child Interaction Therapy
 - Problem Solving Skills Training
 - Multisystemic Therapy

What evidence-based interventions have in common

- Work focuses on adult role in intervention, not child alone
- Strengthen relationships
- Shift focus from negative behavior to positive
- Use (social) learning strategies
- Teach how to give clear instructions and emphasize the importance of coaching and practice

Language

- Many, but certainly not all, children with behavioral problems have limited short-term memory
- Don't over-talk. Focus on "what" you want them to do, not "why". You can talk about why when you process later.
- Give one instruction at a time in clear and concise language (think about 8 words at a time).
- Asked them to explain, in their own words what you want them to do.
- Avoid complicated language forms – figures of speech or metaphors.
- Well chosen humor can sometimes be effective with some children, but avoid sarcasm

Nonverbal

- Meet them at eye level
- Given them space
- Calm, confident, and in control demeanor is key

Processing Speed



- Many, but not all, students with behavioral problems have slower and error prone processing
- They need more time to process. Rushing leads to frustration.
- Emotional dysregulation short circuits connection between the “thinking” and “feeling” brains. No processing until the student has calmed.
- It takes 10 to 20 minutes for rush of cortisol and adrenaline to clear

Start by staying out of Power Struggles



Effective intervention begins when adults understand the oppositional student perceives conflict differently than most children.

The oppositional student feels empowered by the process of confrontation.



- The argument is more important than the outcome.
- The oppositional child intentionally seeks conflict with parents and other adults.
- Your frustration is their reward and it outweighs any punishment!

Define reward and punishment. Why punishment is less effective. 80/20 rule.

Responding to the tactics of Oppositional Students

1) Controlling the TOPIC

- Ignore efforts to change the subject.
- Do not react to challenges.

2) Controlling the TIMING

Use “tagging” to set the time you choose to confront your child’s behavior.

3) Controlling the TONE

Use a respectful tone without yelling and sarcasm.

Oppositional students are such trouble because they don’t respond to correction like other students.



- Their responses are intended to disempower adults.
- Parents, and teachers, feel they have no effective discipline.

They use three phrases which don’t mean what they sound like:

- “I can’t” really means “I won’t”
- “Never” really means “For as far ahead as I am thinking”
- “I don’t care” really means “I don’t want you to know I care”

Respond with one of these phrases...

- “Regardless...”
- “Never-the-less...”

Redefine your relationship with this student.

Your relationship, not the child, is oppositional.



YOU control the other half of the relationship. You can choose to change the rules.

Steps to building relationships:

- Admit mistakes such as being reactive. Model adult behavior.
- Focus on reinforcing the behaviors you want. Punishing bad behavior does not teach good behavior.
- Empower your child. Give choices, provide opportunities for service to the family and others.



You have total control over dispensing or withholding rewards as a consequence!



On the other hand, most punishments require the child's cooperation... (and this kid doesn't cooperate!)

Helping kids be kids!

- Your task is to help kids learn to make good choices, not to make them be good.
- “Different strokes for different folks”, learn what will serve as incentives for this child.
- Use contracts to target specific desired behaviors. Make the measurements visible and concrete.
- Increase your child’s chances for success and reduce anxiety by rewarding the accumulation of tokens.
- **You have total control over dispensing or withholding rewards as a consequence!**

When you must punish...

- Punishment is NOT the key to behavior change. Be clear why you are punishing and whether you need to!
- Rule #1 about rules: No punishment should be harder on adults than the kid.
So, keep the “rules and consequences” few and well planned!
- Your endurance is more important than the size of the punishment.
- Allow your child to choose the punishment from a list you have previously reviewed with him/her. Remember choice is power.
Responsible use of power is the goal.
- “Link” consequences that require cooperation to those that adults have complete control over. Use “two-tier consequences”. Your child will not remind you that he/she depends on you to drive them places, pay for things, sign permissions, cook them meals, etc. You have a lot of power. Don’t use it first but be ready to use it when you don’t get cooperation.

Use love to put kids in their place



Techniques that can help kids see adults as helpful include:

1. Redirect attempts to gain power.
 - Provide opportunities for service to others
 - helping others is empowering!
2. Use humor to re-interpret defiance
 - keep little things little
3. Empathetically re-interpret defiance and engage students in conversation.

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Questions?
