

Parenting the Defiant Child

The defiant child will need a different parenting strategy than perhaps their sibling who is people pleasing. Here are ways to work with your defiant child:

- When possible, give choices – defiant children need to have some control.
- Be mindful of the amount of time you pay attention to their misbehavior in relation to times they are not. When parents spend a greater amount of time on what is going right, children naturally become less defiant.
- Defiant children need to have times when they have predictable engagement with parents in a neutral way. Allow your child to sometimes choose the activity he wishes to engage with you - you will be surprised the difference this makes.
- Accentuate the positive to eliminate the negative. That which we pay attention to you will get more of.
- Modeling taking ownership of your feelings builds trust: for example, “I feel _____ (hurt) when you _____ (don’t tell the truth)”. This will deflect an unwanted argument better than if you begin with “you cannot be trusted...”
- Acknowledge a child’s feelings when they are upset. Children feel understood and are less likely to act out in defiance when they feel understood by a parent. This does not mean that you must agree with them or allow them to do what they want.
- Ask the defiant child what he feels would be appropriate consequence for a given misbehavior. Inviting the child’s input may be helpful in having them observe their own behavior from a different perspective as well as taking ownership of the problem. You are still the parent and call the shots, yet this step helps the child take ownership of their behavior.
- Using natural and logical consequences also puts the problem back to the child. An example of a natural consequence may be a child who experiences rejection from peers after bullying someone at school. A logical consequence could be having the child clean up a mess they created. Through natural and logical consequences, a child learns to connect their behavior to the consequence This is what we commonly refer to as the formation of a conscience. When consequences are given more randomly by a parent, i.e. when a child receives a spanking, slap or lecture or is yelled at for misbehavior the child learns that his behavior is acceptable until external controls are set, or until the parent steps in. This robs the child of the needed skill of developing an internal set of controls
- Developmentally, it is important to remember that what worked for a child when younger, may not work at your child’s present age. For example, at nine years old, a child may respond well to limited responsibilities or choices and an increased number of limits, yet by the time a child reaches 12 or 13 increased responsibilities or choices and fewer limits work best.