

## Dealing with Defiant Children 1:

It is frightening to suspect that something is wrong with your child. When the cause of your worry is your child's misbehaviour, especially towards you, it is confusing and exhausting, too. On the one hand, you believe that no one else your child's age acts like that... but on the other hand don't all kids disobey and challenge authority? Don't they all go through these phases? Do you really have anything to be concerned about at all? You are probably losing sleep agonizing over questions like these. And that is the last thing you need if you usually spend your days battling with your child.

The first step in dealing with a son or daughter that is trying your patience is to build your strength up you be able to address the problems your experiencing with your son or daughter. So let's begin with a simple test to answer the question "Is something wrong with my child?"....

The common thread running through most parents complaints is defiance – that is the repeated failure of your child to follow rules, obey commands, comply with requests, or generally do what is expected of them by parents, teachers, or others. One can consider that a child is oppositional and defiant when the child demonstrates three patterns of behaviour:

1. The child fails to start doing something within one minute after you make the request (or else within one minute of an agreed starting time – e.g. when the cartoon is over).
2. The child fails to finish something you have asked them to do. The child may start something you have asked but just abandon it half way through.
3. The child violates rules of conduct already presented. This could be a child using foul-language when it is forbidden; a child having snacks when the rule is "no snacks without permission".

Now before you begin thinking that all of your children are defiant, one has to appreciate that there are many forms of defiance with varying degrees of aggression. Some children are passively defiant while others are aggressively defiant. Defiant behaviour can run the gamut from whining, complaining, and crying to arguing, yelling, and swearing. So one can think of defiance as being on a continuum from a kind of oppositionalism that is occasionally wearing on you as parent to defiance that is persistent but petty to defiance that is seriously disturbing for you and everyone in your family.

So when does a phase become a problem? A certain amount of defiance is quite normal. A two-year old child that says "No" to everything is quite normal. A 13-year-old boy who, once he enters secondary school, starts pushing things a little is quite normal too. However, a 5 year old that says "No" to everything like he is a 2-year old presents a different challenge. As does a 12-year old girl who has a temper tantrum every time she has to do something that does not appeal to her.

Sometimes defiance is a trait that is in-character for your child's temperament. Parents will often state "he was always difficult, even when he was a toddler." In other situations a child's defiance may be a new thing and therefore possibly caused by

changes in his/her life. Some defiance in children is also attributed to an attention-deficit or hyperactivity.

Whether you think your child's behaviour is a passing phase or a temporary condition, there are things that you can and should do. In the coming weeks I will be looking at principles and techniques that may be helpful to you as a parent. For today however, I will conclude with one vital point about dealing with a child that is defiant and difficult: You will need to work hard at paying attention to the positive things in your child. There is always a danger that you become so focused on his/her defiance that it begins to spiral downward into an almost endless negativity. Don't let that happen! Don't let your child's defiance infect you with the cancer of negativity. Emphasise incentives more than punishments; pay attention to acceptable behaviour your child displays; make sure you have a couple of good moments together each day – even if its just a compliment, a good-humoured 'slag', or an affectionate rub of the head. If you do that, then next week we will look at the best approach you can take to dealing with the problems that are already evident.

**Next Week: Why is this happening? Looking at the causes of defiance in families.**