

Defiant Children II

It is 9:00. It's time for your nine-year-old son, Sean, to brush his teeth and go to bed. You tell him to go. The battle begins. He ignores you and keeps watching TV. You tell him again. He ignores you. You turn off the TV. He gets up and turns it on again in with defiant disdain. He refuses to listen to you. You end up standing in front of the TV. You shout. He shouts. You feel awful. Ten minutes later he falls into bed in tears. You fall dejectedly into your armchair.

Last week we looked at defiance in children acknowledging how frightening it can be to suspect that something is wrong with your child. The common thread running through most parents complaints about their children or teenagers is defiance – that is the repeated failure of your child to follow rules, show respect, comply with requests, or generally do what is expected of them by parents, teachers, or others. One can think of defiance as being on a continuum from being persistent but petty to defiance that is seriously disturbing for you and everyone in your family. Sometimes defiance is a trait caused by changes in a child's life. Some defiance in children is also attributed to an attention-deficit or hyperactivity.

I suggested as an initial step that if you are struggling with a defiant child 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 negativity that it begins to spiral downward into an almost endless negativity. Today we will look briefly at the causes of defiance in families:

When a child or teen begins to terrorise a family it is very tempting to look for someone to blame – either it is them because they are “Trouble” or it is you because you are a “Terrible Parent”. What you really want is some reassurance that your child is not a hopeless case and that you are not a total failure. The most important thing to hold onto for now is that defiant behaviour takes time to develop and can have a complicated set of causes. So don't be too hard on yourself if you have not been able to figure out how you and your child got to where you are. The things that affect how your child behaves are:

1. Your child's temperament and personality.

What is your child's temperament? What motivates him/her in certain situations? Is he/she more self-focused than others, more impatient, hyperactive, etc. Which parent is he/she most like – is he a chip off the ‘old block’ in his defiance? In the example above, Sean might be generally cheerful but resists any change that is not his own idea and is unable to look beyond the present moment in time.

2. The history of your interaction with your child.

What have been the patterns in how the two of you interact over the years when you have asked your child to do something or to not do something? In the example above the mother might have spoiled and molly-coddled Sean because he was ill for a number of years which developed into his being granted more power than was good for him, and now he is reluctant to let it go.

3. Your personality.

How would you describe yourself? Are you cool as a cucumber or fiery hot? Do you have the patience of a saint or are you hot-tempered? Are you and your child similar or different? The mother in the example above may, over the years, have had the patience of a saint – a patience that is now running out.

4. Your family situation.

What might be bothering your child? What might be bothering you? What are you over-sensitive about and compensating for with your child? Do you carry guilt about something? In the example above the family situation could be one where the father is never home at Sean's bedtime, and Sean is defying the parents to rectify this.

5. Your marriage.

Very often children can spot the gaps in the parent's relationship and run right through it as a challenge to the parents to close up that gap. If the parents do not do this the behaviour of the child can begin to affect the relationship.

Often a father might take a casual attitude to the son's defiance and thus isolate the mother with the son, this making the mother look like the bad-one and letting her look weak to the defiant child. The mother's difficulties can then increase, the child can get more obstreperous with the mother, and the passive father might start criticising the mother for how she parents. The solution to the problem might be the need for the father to take the problem seriously and stand square beside the mother in dealing with the child.

All of these factors influence your child and each factor influences the others. Your child's irritability affects your moods, which make your child more defensive. Or your financial situation makes you testy, which encourages your child to oppose you, which puts more stress on you, and makes you more vulnerable. This merry-go-round can spin within every confrontation with your child.

Parent-child interactions cause defiance to grow when they repeatedly follow the same predictable negative patterns. These patterns develop over time. Next week we will look at how those patterns develop.