

PARENTING STRATEGIES FOR THE OPPOSITIONAL OR DEFIANT CHILD

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1. **CONTINUE TO USE RECOMMENDED PARENTING STRATEGIES.** While the ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) type of child may sometimes require strategies that go beyond ordinary parenting approaches, demonstrated effective parenting strategies are still to be recommended. Structure, rules, limits, consequences, chores, family meetings and other ideas described in most parenting books or courses should still be the “backbone” of your approach.
2. **KEEP YOUR COOL.** Typically, ODD children see themselves as a “little adults” in a world where adults are not necessarily deserving of their respect. Indeed, these children seem to draw energy off of adult frustration, upset or uncertainty. By handling yourself in a calm, reasonable and adult fashion, you are presenting yourself as a positive role model deserving of their attention and respect.
3. **DON'T LET THEM PUSH YOUR BUTTONS.** These children are sometimes experts at finding the approach and the timing that is most likely to upset their parent. Identify what tends to bother you most easily and be prepared to respond minimally or in a fashion that shows that they did not “get to you”.
4. **CLEAR RULES, EXPECTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES ARE NEEDED.** If there is any inconsistency or ambiguity, these children will recognize it and exploit it. Different rules or approaches between important caregivers will add to the idea that “adults don't know what they are doing”. Like junior lawyers, they will pick apart and argue about perceived unfairness or inconsistencies. Lay out their “choices”.
5. **CHOOSE THE TOPIC AND DIRECTION OF CONVERSATION.** You do not have to “take the bait” when your child is arguing, challenging or trying to push your buttons. Set your priorities for discipline and discussion. Change topics, ignore or identify your disinterest in the pursuing certain topics. Use “collaborative problem solving” (Greene).
6. **CHOOSE THE TIMING OF A CONFRONTATION.** These children often provoke confrontations when you are disadvantaged, for example tired, rushing to get things done or in a public setting. “Tag” a misbehavior or issue as something to be dealt with later, at your choosing. Table the concern when you are up to it, with the likely advantages of cooler heads, better strategies to approach the issue and the possible input or involvement of another adult.
7. **ESTABLISH THE MOOD OF A CONFRONTATION.** By taking a calm, matter-of-fact and problem-solving approach, you are being adult and reasonable, so there is a better chance that the discussion will go well. If the child or teen gets unreasonable or abusive, calmly point this out and request improvement. Otherwise, suggest that the topic be revisited later or identify consequences. Be brief, as generally actions speak louder than words, with less opportunity for further argument.
8. **SEEK TO AVOID OUTRIGHT POWER STRUGGLES AND STAND-OFFS.** These children are often stubborn, so these are usually unpleasant, lengthy and likely to wear you down. Instead, lay out your expectations and the consequences for their positive or negative choices. Another good strategy is “Grandma’s Rule” i.e.: “When you do _____, then you may _____”.
9. **DO NOT LET THEIR NEGATIVE MOODS DOMINATE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.** It should not be your job to make them happy or control their moods. Only they can learn to better manage their intense and changeable moods, aggression and threats, which most often come up because they are not getting what they want. . Indeed, their unhappiness may be a reason to recognize and change their approach to life (e.g. How’s that working for you?” discussions)

10. **BE CREATIVE, USING A MIXTURE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES.** Utilize your knowledge of what is meaningful for your child. Many parents have a small number of predictable consequences, which tend to lose their power over time. Constant use of punishments alone becomes unpleasant. However, do not expect that your ODD child to be happy about or acknowledge the significance of the consequences you have chosen, especially in the “heat of the moment”.
11. **USE TWO-TIER CONSEQUENCES.** In this approach, a child is effectively given the chance to complete a briefer, compliance-dependent consequence to bring to an earlier close or avoid a consequence that the parent has control over. For example, “You can either do a proper job raking the leaves today (specify timeline and that job must pass your inspection) or you will lose your video game system for a week”.
12. **DISCIPLINARY CONSEQUENCES HAVE TO WORK FOR THE PARENT TOO.** Don’t choose a consequence that is harder on the parent (to impose, supervise or wait out) than the child. Avoid situations of extended groundings or total withdrawal of privileges, as this is unpleasant for all and encourages the child’s stubborn efforts to prove that they “don’t care”.
13. **CATCH THEM BEING GOOD.** Avoid the pattern of only attending to their misbehavior. Look for chances to praise them, act playful or be nurturing with them. Keeping some sense of positive relationship with them is essential. Particularly watch for times when they are acting in a more age-appropriate or pleasant way and encourage this by responding with positive attention.
14. **USE DIVERSION STRATEGIES.** This means responding to an oppositional or defiant behavior in an off-topic or unexpected way. With younger children, tickling, gentle teasing or becoming playful might work. Often these children have some sense of humor, even about their O&D strategies, so a humorous response can be disarming. “Metaphorical diversion” is when you label ODD behavior as a sign that they “must be” depressed, tired or perhaps becoming ill.
15. **ORGANIZE THE ADULTS.** Your authority as important adults will be bolstered when parent figures, school authorities and other key adults are working the same program and in partnership. Never criticize or undermine the authority of others in front of the child. The ODD child easily dismisses arguing or indecisive adults and eventually this will backfire upon impact upon their respect for you as well.
16. **RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN ODD PATTERNS.** Some parents of ODD children are themselves stubborn, argumentative or critical of others. Such parents do themselves, their child and everyone a favor when they can manage to set this aside to work cooperatively with other key adult figures to use these strategies.
17. **LOOK AFTER YOURSELF!** Dealing with an ODD child can be frustrating and exhausting. You will need some breaks, fresh ideas and moral support. Try not to personalize their angry responses. Recognize that there may be times when it is difficult to like or want to be with your child. If there is a co-parent or other adult in the picture, especially if they are using the same strategies, take turns and spell one another off. Attend a parents’ support group if available.
18. **BE REALISTIC ABOUT PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE:** O&D children are rarely “customers” for help. The emphasis will usually need to be on supporting the adults to find better strategies to manage child’s challenges while helping them develop better skills. There is no medication miracle here. Change here is gradual and about “improvements” not “fix”
19. **STUDY:** “Livesinthebalance.org” regarding Collaborative Problem-Solving (Greene)
20. **GIVE YOURSELF CREDIT** for working so hard for your child and your family!