

Basic Principles for Helping Oppositional Children

Beyond Rewards and Consequences. Any approach which emphasizes rewards and consequences is going to be limited in its effectiveness. We must understand and address the child's needs and teach the child skills that help them to be more cooperative.

Recognize the Child's Perspective. Know Your Child. We need to understand why a child is behaving the way they are if we are to truly help them with their oppositional behavior. Sometimes, we get so caught up in a child's oppositional behavior that we forget who they really are.

Consider the Payoffs for Noncompliance. In many cases, there are payoffs for noncompliance. If you attempt to eliminate the oppositional behavior without understanding the payoffs, you may have limited success.

Work Towards Cooperation, Not Just Obedience. Although obedience is important, an obedient child who is under the control of external rewards and consequences may lack the self-discipline they need when they become independent. Cooperation involves a broader understanding of goals, rules, natural consequences, the perspective of others and the impact our behavior has upon the world around us.

Avoid the Oppositional Label. Don't be too quick to describe your child as uncooperative. Sometimes it is better to reframe the issue in a way that avoids a power struggle.

Talk Less. One of the most common mistakes is talking too much. Please keep requests short and sweet and "lectures" brief.

Reduce Requests. Start Simple. Sometimes it is best to reduce your expectations and ask for less. If we have simpler goals, we are more likely to achieve success and develop more positive attitudes and habits.

Prioritize. It is best to prioritize your expectations, starting with the easiest or most important requests. As the child becomes more cooperative and develops a more positive attitude, we can hopefully expect more.

Emphasize Attitudes, Not Just Accomplishment. A child who develops a positive attitude about completing a chore or honoring a request is going to be more successful than a youngster who cooperates grudgingly because of threatened consequences.

Be Wary of External Consequences. An overuse of rewards or consequences may undermine a child's internal motivation.

Build Habits and Routines. Good habits and routines avoid the need for commands and encourages cooperation "without requests." The child that takes their empty plate to the kitchen

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after dinner or starts an assignment upon coming in from recess is behaving cooperatively without being asked and without really thinking about it.

Take Care of Yourself. Helping an oppositional child can be hard work. Parents need support and nurturing. They need adequate sleep, nutrition, and time for recreation. If a parent does not take care of themselves, they cannot take care of their child.

Don't Rush the Child. One of the most common reasons that children behave oppositionally is that they are rushed. Some children just need a slower pace, with more time to decide that they want to cooperate.

Slow the Pace. Many families and classrooms are too fast-paced. We are expecting too much from our children and not giving them the down time, they need.

Avoid the Dance. Oppositional behavior can become a pattern between parent and child. Avoid the oppositional cycle by doing the unexpected and changing the way you approach the child.

Empower the Child. Give limited choices to your child when appropriate. Asking a child for advice gives a youngster a sense of contribution. Offer to help your child but limit uninvited and unwanted correction or criticism. Requiring chores from a child involves a legitimate and valued contribution to the family.

Time Your Requests. Try and time your requests so that they match when the child is most likely to cooperate. Find the times when the child is the freshest, the most alert and in the best mood. Avoid moments when you are not likely to follow through or when the child is so absorbed in an activity that they are likely to resist what is asked of them.

Don't Over control. There are many situations where children should be allowed to make their own choices. There are some issues that we are better off letting go of and avoiding a power struggle.

Model Cooperation. Children do not appreciate that their parents must cooperate also. Make sure to model examples of adult cooperation (cooperation between spouses, cooperation with traffic rules or job rules or classroom rules)

"Win-Win" Compromise. Consider striving for a compromise where both the parent and child have their needs met.

Practice. Sometimes the best approach is practicing routines and behaviors so that they can become more automatic.

Emphasize the Positive. It is better to focus on instances of cooperation than it is to emphasize noncompliance. We tend to overlook how many times a child actually behaves cooperatively.

Look for Where the Child is Cooperative. There are situations and settings where an oppositional child does cooperate. We can learn a great deal about a child's underlying problems and motivations by considering where the youngster does best.

Stack the Odds. We can reduce oppositional behavior and improve attitudes by asking children to do things that they would ordinarily like to do. A child is more likely to help if we ask them to take out the ice cream or drive to the supermarket for us. This type of cooperation gives us a chance to provide positive feedback.