

Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Underlying Causes

It is important that we consider the **underlying cause** of a child's oppositional and defiant behavior. If we do not understand why a child is behaving oppositionally, we will not know how to help them. Treatment of oppositional behavior is not simply a matter of rewarding cooperation and punishing noncompliance. In fact, rewards and consequences may make the problem worse for some children. To be effective we need to teach the children new behaviors, attitudes, and skills so that they can learn to be more cooperative. Before doing this, we must address any problems or issues that are interfering with the child's ability to cooperate and control their anger.

Children with **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder** are more likely to show anger and oppositional behavior. Typically, more extreme in their demands and their emotional reactions, ADHD children often have difficulty when their demands are not met immediately or when they encounter some frustration. This over reactivity leads an ADHD child to become more easily annoyed by adult requests and more reactive to perceived issues of unfairness or provocation.

Boys and girls who are **anxious** often show a pattern of avoidance and noncompliance that can be perceived as oppositional. A child anxious about their school abilities may refuse to do schoolwork, for example. A youngster who is extremely shy may refuse to talk in public or perform in front of an audience.

Some children are **depressed** and therefore lack the drive or motivation to cooperate with family routines, school expectations or other adult requests. In childhood, depression may also include features of anger and noncompliance that reflects an underlying negative self-esteem. A depressed child will not become more cooperative unless they have some optimism regarding themselves, their "world" and their future.

Emotional over reactivity and sensory sensitivity may contribute to oppositional and argumentative behavior. Some children experience emotion more spontaneously and intensely. They seem quick to frustration or disappointment, anxiousness, sadness, joy, etc. In such children, the oppositionality is "fueled" by emotion and not reason. A sensitive child may have trouble with the smell of a particular food, or the feel of an item of clothing and resist cooperating with a parent's request to finish dinner or get dressed for school.

Children with **anger control problems** which make it difficult for them to handle frustration, disappointment, unfairness, annoyance, or ridicule. Not surprisingly, children with anger problems resist adult requests and family routines when they are perceived as unfair or interfering with their personal agenda. More easily disappointed, they tend to argue with parents when they don't get what they want and become hostile with their family and friends when they are frustrated.

A youngster who has been **over controlled**, tends to resist adult commands and routines. A child pushed to read or play sports may resist those activities. A child who is given too much direction and too many consequences tends to react oppositionally in a desire for more autonomy. Children need to make choices and they need to feel as if their behavior is internally directed. Even a child

who receives rewards for their behavior may begin to resist earning reward if it appears as if their behavior is being externally controlled.

Some children have **learned** to be oppositional because they have not experienced firm limits, rules, expectations, or consequences. A child can learn to avoid tasks through noncompliance. They may learn from a young age that they get what they want through persistent badgering and arguing.

Driven children are so passionate that they have a very hard time when they cannot pursue their agenda. Such children are seemingly insatiable, and they will pursue their goal with amazing zeal. They may become oppositional when someone interferes with what they are doing or what they want. Understandably, they may have a hard time with negotiation or problem solving because virtually any compromise will "interfere" with their immediate goal.

Inflexibility makes it hard for a child to switch or adjust to new routines. An inflexible child may find it hard to compromise or accept another person's point of view. As a result, they are more oppositional and less cooperative.

A **hurried and overscheduled family** tends to experience more oppositionality in their children. Children need more time to unwind and spend time with their parents. Families who are rushed to do household chores, eat dinner, and complete homework will experience more resistance in their children. Children who have too many activities on their calendar and not enough time to play show this through their mood and behavior. Children under too much pressure to complete schoolwork and meet state standards may become more resistant to doing assignments and studying for tests.

Youngsters with **skill deficits** may exhibit oppositional behavior. We have seen learning disabled children refuse to do school assignments. Uncoordinated children will resist PE activities. Children with expressive language problems may not want to participate in class.