

Responding to Noncompliance

“What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow.”

Reframe your thinking. Be careful about the negative attributions we form when children don't cooperate. A diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder, for example, frames behavior as a battle between child and parent and does little to explain why a child is struggling. Remember that children are a reflection of their genetics, upbringing and environment; all elements that parents are a part of. Labeling noncompliance as a character trait or flaw in a child typically makes things worse.

Do a deeper dive. When children are uncooperative we need to ponder carefully the reasons why. Are they anxious or depressed? Are they overscheduled or tired? Perhaps they are obsessive and get stuck in their thinking. Labeling noncompliance as opposition or defiance provides a false explanation of why a child is struggling.

Watch and listen. Observing a child's nonverbal behavior (breathing, body posture, hand gestures, facial cues, complexion) can help us anticipate whether the child is likely to escalate. Listen for clues as to what is upsetting the child and seek an opportunity to empathize and reflect back what you are hearing.

Accept and acknowledge the barrier. Don't discount or dismiss the reasons your child gives for not wanting to do what is expected. Showing an understanding of their view will increase the likelihood of obtaining cooperation. It's better to acknowledge their desire to finish their game or complete the drawing and address their concern than it is to dismiss their objection entirely.

Avoid unproductive conversation. Parents often respond to noncompliance with a predictable pattern of warnings and lectures that an uncooperative child has heard many times before. When your child is refusing to cooperate, talk less. Avoid the information fallacy; repeatedly explaining what a child “should” already know will lead to more cooperation (e.g. posting more speed limit signs will not lead to safer driving).

Keep it simple. We have provided a list of simple phrases you can use in response to task resistance. These phrases should be used calmly, with more of an encouraging rather than threatening tone. We often use the phrase “Let's keep this simple” and define the expectation as a matter of being kind, helpful, responsible or respectful. Another favorite phrase that parents use is, “I am not going to fight to get you to do what is right.”). Select your favorite phrases and practice them so they are delivered smoothly. Role-play with your children how these phrases will be used and how you hope they will respond. A list of possible phrases is included in the Talk Less, But Say More unit.

Stay calm. Anger is an infectious emotion; the angrier you get the more you risk your child losing their temper (there are exceptions). One critical factor fueling parental anger is the notion that our children must obey in the moment. While there are occasions when cooperation in the moment is

The Children's Program retains the rights for reproduction of this document. Do not copy in whole or in part in any form. Additional copies are available by request from The Children's Program.

essential, there are many occasions when we can “let it go for now and arrange a learning lesson later.” As we have discussed, try to be aware of the thoughts that fuel your anger (“I never would have behaved that way with my mom/dad”, “he/she/they is being a spoiled brat”, “She never listens.”)

Use the “fork in the road.” You can often shorten the process and limit noncompliant interactions by simply noting that you are at a “fork in the road” where the child decides if they going to cooperate (e.g. do what’s right, be helpful, show responsibility, follow the routine, keep their agreements) or not. A decision not to cooperate is followed with another simple phrase (e.g. “Good luck with that” or “I hope you realize what you are doing”).

Use threats cautiously. Every parent has moments when they use threats to gain their child's cooperation. Threats can be helpful; when they reference previously discussed consequences and when the tone is more neutral than harsh (e.g. “please do the right thing and turn off the computer, I really don’t want you to lose your privileges.”). Although threats may be easy to use, a reliance on threats often teaches children to cooperate only when threatened. When they cooperate under threat their attitude is negative and they don’t recognize the important, positive reasons to cooperate. In some children, threats of consequences actually escalate the noncompliance and trigger anger. Beware of using threats too often.

Be open and reasonable. Although children must learn respect for adult authority, the “do it because I say so” approach can be overused. If your child raises an appropriate point in a respectful way, you should be prepared to discuss it. There is a difference between arguing and discussing an issue.

Use the “broken record.” Do not be sucked into an argument with an angry child. You can acknowledge their view, but it does not help to debate rules or limits. Stick to the basic bottom lines and do not get involved in countering your child’s objections (e.g., “I know that you don’t think that your hands are dirty but in our family we wash up before eating”).

Refer to the family rules. When children argue, refer to a family rule that has already been discussed and agreed upon. When there is a family expectation that everyone helps at dinner time or that everyone parks their phone in the evening, there is better cooperation. Parents are as obligated to enforce family rules and agreements as children are to follow them. It is much harder for children to argue and resist when parents reference the importance of being consistent and predictable.

Delay the discussion. When children want to argue, it helps to delay the argument to a time that is more convenient for you and less convenient for them. Children will readily argue before bedtime when it delays going to sleep; they may not want to have the same argument if it delays their playtime or screen time.

Avoid the power struggle. There are a number of strategies for responding to a noncompliant child’s behavior that do not include warning, threatening or bullying. We are trying to build an attitude of cooperation and a pattern of positive behavior that does not rely upon negative

The Children's Program retains the rights for reproduction of this document. Do not copy in whole or in part in any form. Additional copies are available by request from The Children's Program.

consequences. If we use threats or punishments to obtain a child's cooperation, we may find ourselves resorting to that method of parenting more and more.

Parents are a team. It is important that children understand that parents work together as a team and that they support each other ("I promised mom that the toys would be put away before we go to soccer and I am not going to disappoint her."). Refer to parenting decisions or expectations as a shared parent perspective (e.g. "Mom and I agree that homework is done before gaming" or "Dad and I have already discussed this with you").

Is it can't or won't? Some children are uncooperative because they don't believe that they can do what you ask. They would rather be noncompliant than unsuccessful. Make sure that your requests are well within your child's ability and consider whether it is a lack of confidence and not defiance.

Charge for your time. When children argue or waste your time, charge for it. You can use your watch or a timer to keep track of the amount of time being wasted. You can then require your son or daughter to pay you back the time with a chore or with a gift of time. Children who refuse to pay their parents back for wasted time will find their parents unwilling to extend themselves (e.g., no ride to a friend's, no time to hand out allowance, not in the mood to help get on the Internet).

Use "Time out" (but sparingly). There comes a point when a child's noncompliance makes it hard for you to "go about your business." If you cannot continue a phone call, enjoy your sandwich or do your paperwork because of your child's disruptive behavior, then a time out is appropriate. (Please recognize the difference between a time-out and a calm down. Time outs are a consequence for inappropriate behavior while calm downs are a process for controlling anger.) Common time out mistakes include continued parent child interaction during the time out, overly long time outs that distress a child or brief time outs that don't effectively discourage negative behavior. Whatever time out parameters you choose, please make sure that your child is calm enough and ready to behave properly before the time out is over. (I often ask a child to demonstrate that they are ready to cooperate with some small task or kind act.)

Reframe the Problem. One of the most interesting techniques for improving compliance is reframing. Instead of blaming the child, reframe the problem and provide a paradoxical consequence. Blame the media when children have trouble turning off the TV and restrict the media's influence by restricting TV time (e.g., "they make this show so hard to turn off, maybe we shouldn't watch it for awhile"). Resistance to picking up toys might be an issue of having too many to take care of. Offer to put some in storage to make it easier.

Suggest Practice. Some children need to practice cooperation. For some youngsters, it helps to present a choice of cooperating in the moment or practicing multiple times later. A parent can pick the practice moments that suit their schedule (not when they are rushing out the door for school). They can also assign the positive practice as part of granting the child's agenda ("you can go outside to play with your friends after you practice setting the table with a positive attitude"). This gives a parent more leverage and may help a child be more cooperative the next time you mention needing to practice.

"Just a minute." When children say, "just a minute," you can ask them why they need a minute. If you accept their reasoning, then you should be willing to come back later and repeat the request. It helps to agree ahead of time on what will happen if your child does not cooperate when they are given the extra time. Perhaps there will be no gaming tomorrow if they don't turn off the game when given the extra 5 minutes today.

Do it yourself. When your child is uncooperative it sometimes is best to just do the chore yourself. Children will soon learn that there are repercussions when parents do the work. Sometimes there is a loss of a future privilege and sometimes there is less parent support when a child needs help. One of the most effective phrases is when you say "never mind, I'll do it", stepping out of the conflict and teaching the lesson later. It only takes a few lessons before a child understands what "never mind" really means.

"Have it your way." Sometimes the best response to noncompliance is to walk away and let your child have it his or her way. Often children will cooperate because they sense that the tug of war is over and there will be consequences (now or later). There will always be opportunities to arrange a lesson about the importance of cooperation. We have included links and supplementary materials in the handouts section that discuss the different types of consequences that can be used.

Model consequences for noncompliance. It really helps children to see that there are consequences for parents when they don't cooperate. Set up a situation where a spouse or older sibling does not cooperate. Your child may be helped by seeing that cooperation is an important expectation for everyone.

Don't lecture. Perhaps out of frustration, adults lecture children when they are angry. These speeches have usually been heard many times before and are often filled with generalizations and judgments that only fuel the child's anger. Since most people don't think very clearly when they are angry, we should not expect a child to react productively to what we say.

Develop your firm, authoritative side. There are many reasons why some adults are more effective than others in responding to an angry child. Some parents use threatening consequences inappropriately, inadvertently fueling a child's anger. Others stay engaged far too long, failing to recognize that we are moving towards a meltdown instead of resolving the issue. Some parents are too passive and accepting of a child's threatening and disruptive behavior. Those parents have to develop a firmer style, using simple key words that "connect the dots" and help a child inhibit the child's anger. Your body posture, voice or key phrases are not designed to scare a child, but should create concern about what will happen if they don't cooperate or try to calm down.

Responding to Noncompliance Summary

- Reframe your thinking.
- Do a deeper dive.
- Accept and acknowledge the barrier to their cooperation.
- Avoid the conversation.
- Keep it simple.
- Stay Calm.
- Use the “fork in the road.”
- Use threats cautiously.
- Be reasonable.
- Use the mantra.
- Refer to the rule/guideline.
- Delay the discussion.
- Avoid the power struggle.
- Parents are a team.
- Is it a can’t or a won’t?
- Charge for your time.
- Use “time out” but sparingly.
- Reframe the problem.
- Suggest practice.
- “Just a minute.”
- Do it yourself.
- “Have it your way.”
- Model consequences for noncompliance.

The Children's Program retains the rights for reproduction of this document. Do not copy in whole or in part in any form. Additional copies are available by request from The Children's Program.