

Oppositional Defiance Disorder and Changing the Pay Off

What makes a child oppositional?

There is probably a different answer for this question for every child identified as oppositional. However, some general explanations seem to apply to most oppositional children. First and foremost is that their oppositional behavior pays off in some type of reward. Most often the children are not even aware of their own intentions. With this in mind, **parents should not "blame" the child** for his/her behavior. Simply develop an understanding of the child's motivations and the underlying/unconscious processes that control the oppositional behavior. Most parents express that they don't have a clue as to what is happening. To understand this more clearly we need to examine the focus of both the parents and child. When an argument occurs, the focus of the parent(s) is usually on resolution of the dispute. For the oppositional child the focus is not on the outcome of the argument, but on "winning" the argument. Winning does not necessarily mean the outcome of the argument leads to desired objects or activities. For the oppositional child winning means that he/she is able to demonstrate his/her power. Power can be demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, power can be demonstrated if the child is able to make the parent angry, cause an argument between mother and father, delay going to an appointment, or simply increase tension within the household. The point to remember is that the oppositional child is not interested in resolution or logical/rational solutions. The oppositional child's focus is on "winning" as defined above. Parents on the other hand, find themselves frustrated and confused because they can't understand "what is going on in his head" (as one mother put it).

Jekyll and Hyde

Some parents are surprised when told by others that their child is "so well mannered." "What," they say, "You couldn't have possibly been referring to my child." After recovering from the initial shock they come to realize that they are the primary target of their child's wrath. They are not the only targets, however. Their child will display oppositional/defiant behavior toward most authority figures.

Principles of behavior:

In order to understand behavior we must examine the consequences of the behavior. In other words, what is the *payoff* of the oppositional behavior? In order to understand the payoff we must first understand a concept referred to by behavioral psychologists as avoidance conditioning. In essence, avoidance conditioning occurs when a person learns to avoid an aversive (bad) consequence. Psychologists tell us that avoidance conditioning influences much of human behavior. That people learn that by doing something they can avoid an aversive circumstance. For example, people get up and go to work to avoid the consequence of losing their home and not being able to pay bills. We drive on the right side of the road to avoid the dire consequence associated with driving on the wrong side of the road. We exercise and eat the right foods to avoid getting fat and having bad health. Wait!! Not everybody exercises and eats right! Even though most people understand that they should, they don't actually do what is best for them. Why? Because of competing reinforcers like cup cakes, ribs, steak, and sitting on the couch watching the tube. So, while avoidance conditioning helps to explain some of our behavior, it doesn't explain everything.

Now that you have a basic understanding of avoidance conditioning, let's apply it to the oppositional child. The oppositional child not only responds to avoidance conditioning (as we all do), she also is a master at using it. By controlling the household through the regular application of aversives, the oppositional child gains power. Parents of oppositional children regularly report that they avoid anything confrontational (which is almost everything). Many parents make the statement, "We all walk on egg shells" to describe the reaction of the family to the oppositional child. This allows the oppositional child to win many silent

victories. Parents become wary to confront the child. As a result, the child may be allowed to stretch limits and occasionally break rules.

To complete our understanding of the dynamics of the oppositional child we must again look to behavioral psychology and the concept of intermittent reinforcement. Intermittent reinforcement, as the name implies, is reinforcement (rewards) which occurs on an intermittent or irregular basis, not every time the behavior occurs. Research clearly shows that the use of intermittent reinforcement is a powerful tool in establishing a behavioral response. Psychologists are not the only people who understand this principle, just look at the gambling industry. All games of chance use this principle to entice patrons to spend their hard earned dollars. With this in mind, we can now understand why the oppositional behavior doesn't have to pay off every time, every once and awhile is enough.

Changing the oppositional behavior.

The first step to changing the oppositional behavior is to remove the payoff. The first payoff to deal with is the emotional response of the parent. Find out what your buttons are and protect them from assault. Be determined to keep your cool even in the heat of battle. The parent must assume control of the interaction and not allow the child to lead them to distraction. Most of our responses of anger are learned the same way the oppositional child learns his/her behavior, by using the anger as an aversive consequence to get the results we want. Instead, we must learn to deal with the oppositional child from the perspective of a loving relationship. Don't mistake love with dependence. Some parents have developed a dependence on their child to fill their emotional needs. In cases like this the child often makes statements like "I hate you" or "you don't love me." These phrases are, once again, used due to their effectiveness in getting an emotional response from the parent. In other words, the child has identified a "button." Parents with dependency issues may need to seek the assistance of a counselor or therapist to deal with this problem if they feel they cannot control their emotions.

Next, refuse to discuss anything with the child when he/she is irrational or abusive. Be positive and supportive until the child attempts to "push a button" or use an irrational argument. Be firm and consistent with enforcing rules. **AVOID physical punishment!!** Physical punishment usually makes matters worse when dealing with a child who is oppositional. Instead, make a list of rules and corresponding consequences. Everything should be spelled out as clearly as possible. As a general rule, consequences should not require action on the part of the child (e.g., mowing the yard or other chores). Instead, they should be in the form of losing some privilege (watching T.V.) or taking away a desired object or toy (radio, Nintendo, favorite CD).

Attempt to make consequences both natural and logical. By this I mean the misbehavior should result in an aversive that occurs naturally. An example of a natural consequence would be a situation where the child becomes angry and throws a toy on the floor, breaking it. The parent should calmly point out that the child no longer will have that toy. An example of a logical consequence would be a situation where the child tracks mud into the house. The parent then requires the child to clean up the tracks.

Do not play "Let's Make a Deal" with the child, "If you'll clear up your room, you can go to the movies tonight." Too many parents use this approach to get the child to do something and bargaining becomes a way of life. The parent is constantly caught in a struggle to make the deal. Instead, enforce predetermined consequences and apply intermittent reinforcement (remember that term?) for good behavior. A reinforcer is anything that the child likes or desires. Examples of reinforcers can include praise, spending quality time together, or going to a movie to name a few. Part of parenting is identifying what those things your child finds rewarding. Instead of using the "Let's Make a Deal" method of behavior management, the parent in the above scenario should have a rule listed on the child list stating that he/she will clean up his/her bedroom every afternoon (or whenever deemed appropriate). If the child fails to clean up his/her bedroom the parent should implement the predetermined consequence (e.g., no T.V. and/or cleaning other rooms of the house).

"I don't care!"

This is what almost every parent tells me their children will say to them when I explain the need to use consequences for misbehavior. Trust me (famous last words, right?), this is another "push the button" tactic. The firm and consistent application of aversive consequences coupled with liberal doses of love and positive reinforcement will wear them down and they will care.

Be careful of what you ask

Once you have issued a rule or instruction, you shouldn't back down. The primary rule is that the child must obey the parent - that means you! Asking children to do something means that if they don't, you are going to have to apply the consequences. Make certain your order makes sense, is necessary, and is something the child can accomplish. Try placing your orders in the form of a request and use the magic words, please and thank you. Always attempt to convey respect and concern for the child's feelings. Remember, much of the way children interact comes from modeling parent behavior. Make certain the consequence is appropriate for the infraction. Be reasonable! Don't restrict the child to the house for three months because he/she made a phone call after hours.

Parental Cooperation

In two parent households, BOTH parents must agree, be involved and committed to making the necessary changes involved in dealing with the oppositional child.

Remain calm and in control.

Issue consequences for misbehavior when you're certain you feel calm and have control of your emotions. Many times it is best to wait and issue punishment sometime after you have become aware of the behavior. This allows for both the parents and the child to calm down and rationally deal with the problem. Tell the child that you are aware of the misbehavior and will deal with it later. If, when issuing the punishment, the oppositional child attempts to distract you with an argument, apply a 5 or 10 minute time-out to give them a chance to calm down. Explain to them the reason for the punishment. Be firm, fair, and remain calm.

Warning:

Increased negative interaction can interfere with a loving relationship. The oppositional child can cause a parent to be torn between feelings of intense love and hate. Remember that you love your child but hate the behavior. Separate the two and deal with each. I've already outlined how to deal with the behavior. Next, let's talk about dealing with the child.

It is of utmost importance that parents put effort (a lot of effort) into nurturing the relationship they have with their child. I like to use the analogy of a gardener trying to raise a flower garden. Simply pulling the weeds is not enough. The gardener must water, feed, and provide a protected environment to achieve the desired result. Time, effort, and great patience must be put into the garden. Positive feedback and physical affection are needed to develop the oppositional child into a child who is responsive. Regularly tell the child what they are doing right. NEVER use the phrase, "You're a bad boy/girl." This sets up an expectation that the child may feel obligated to meet. Instead make the child feel as if any misbehavior on their part is inconsistent with who they are. Say, "What you did was wrong and I can't understand why a smart/good/wonderful kid like you would do that."

Noncontingent Spontaneous Rewards:

The word contingent means that something is given only if a certain act/behavior is first carried out. So, Noncontingent Spontaneous Rewards means that rewards are given for no reason at all. The child doesn't

have to do anything to get them, they just happen for no reason. Spontaneously take your child to a park, movie, zoo, or for a walk. Walk in the door after work with a small toy, comic book, or some candy.

Tell them they're loved.

At least four times a day!! You don't even have to say "I love you" every single time. I overheard a friend of mine tell his little boy, "You light up my world." The boy's eyes brightened when he heard this and he ran and hugged my friend. What a great return for such a small investment (Wall Street eat your heart out). I heard another friend tell her daughter, "I love you more than butterflies." The little girl giggled and said, "Me too." The key is to let your child know that he is loved and is important.

Never allow the child to think that he/she is not loved because of their behavior. Love must be constant and enduring.

Build their self-esteem

Self-esteem and self-confidence are important factors in the development and prevention of oppositional behavior. Children who are confident in themselves are less likely to feel threatened and become angry during a disagreement. I tell parents to try to avoid criticism and focus most on the things their child is doing right. This builds self-esteem in the child and makes her more willing to achieve goals. Support your child's interests and help her gain mastery in something.

Spend time with your child.

Learn how to play Nintendo. Play with Barbies. Color pictures. Play a game. Give a cooking lesson. Ride bikes. Take a walk. Go bird watching. Thumb wrestle. Play pattycake. Jump rope. Do a puzzle. Make a model. Fly a kite. Play catch. Shoot hoops. Look at clouds/stars. Do something that they want to do.

Talk with your child, but mostly listen.

Listen to your child and take what they have to say seriously. Spend time listening to them about their day and withhold any negative or critical comments.

Don't sweat the small stuff.

Kids are people too. Your child will make mistakes or behavior in ways which you may not agree. You must ask yourself whether or not intervention is warranted. Some parents think children need to be like themselves and make the same decisions. This is far from the case and most often not the case at all. Allow the child to develop her own personality and way of dealing with the world. Many of the mistakes kids make carry their own consequences (natural consequences) that are sufficient.

Don't expect miracles.

Odds are things will get worse before they get better. The oppositional child has well learned and established ways of interacting with you and change will not happen quickly or easily. The child will attempt to hang on to their previously successful behavior. The child may become increasingly frustrated when parents change the effectiveness of his/her oppositional attempts. Have patience and be persistent, as well as consistent, in removing the oppositional payoff.

The continuum of opposition

Mild Moderate Severe

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Mild opposition is characterized by behavior that is troublesome for the parent but still manageable. The child is responsive to the parent but displays some verbal ("smarts off") or behavioral (stomps feet, slams door) defiance. The oppositional behavior occurs in one or two contexts, such as home or school.

Oppositional behavior in the moderate category is characterized by defiant behavior which is consistent and is generalized across many different contexts. The child is argumentative with parents and other adults. The child becomes angry and emotional during confrontations. Parents feel powerless in dealing with the child.

Severe opposition is characterized by violent or dangerous behavior. Parents have little or no control over the child. Most parent-child interaction is negative and/or argumentative. Parents with children in this category of opposition usually need professional assistance in dealing with the child.

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