

Catholic Parenting 101

What to Do with Oppositional and Defiant Behavior

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Few things steal the joy of parenting like defiant, entitled, and impulsive children. Watching your child challenge rules, lose temper, and demand privileges can poison the emotional health of your family. This might even drive you to the brink of despair! However, by moving in a new direction you can get back in the driver's seat and return your family to the loving community for which God created and planned.

Understand the Problem

In order to turn things around, begin to keep a behavioral journal. Purchase a notebook and begin observing and recording what happens between you and your child before, during, and after these frustrating encounters. Then imagine how these events unfolded through the eyes of your child. Notice his or her emotional responses, especially whether or not he or she seems rejected or misunderstood. Children with oppositional behavior often struggle with emotional processing. Because of this, they frequently feel confused and frustrated inside, and believe others are misunderstanding and being mean to them. As a result, oppositional behavior becomes the only safe, familiar, and habitual way to express their frustration. In a similar way, record what was going on for you during the frustrating event, including what you were thinking, feeling, saying, and doing. Notice how you might have contributed to the problem. Remember that children with oppositional behavior can bring out the worst in adults. Adults often respond uncharacteristically by yelling, ignoring, criticizing, interrupting, threatening, and/or becoming verbally or physically aggressive. Such adult reactivity reinforces oppositional behavior in a child.

Changes that Will Work Wonders

The following seven tips can help you move in a new direction so your family can be the loving community that God and you desires.

- 1. Be gentle with yourself.** You will not find more compassion for your child until you first find it for yourself. Practice grounding and regulating your emotions through exercise, prayer, and general good self-care. Consider using a breath prayer regularly: Say to yourself while breathing in, "I can do all things" then say while breathing out "through Christ who strengthens me" (based on Philippians 4:13). You can also imagine breathing in God's peace and exhaling your frustration, picturing yourself inhaling pure, clear air and exhaling dark smoke. Staying grounded and calm will be the foundation for changing the way you interact with your child.
- 2. Be gentle with your child.** Remember that your child may often feel frustrated and confused about his or her emotions. Your compassion and empathy will help your child to heal and grow.
- 3. Relentlessly work to see your child in a positive way.** Catch the child behaving cooperatively and compassionately and celebrate it. Challenge yourself to prayerfully discover your child's personality strengths hidden during their annoying behavior. For example, stubbornness might be hidden perseverance.
- 4. Pursue a positive connection with your child.** Create a regular space and time to connect with your child that is fun and positive, and that is separate from the oppositional interactions.

5. Commit to compassionate, calm, firm, logical, and creative responses to their most annoying behaviors. Avoid verbal and physical violence. Remember, if you need to remind someone you are in control, you are not! Focus less on showing your child that you are in control. Focus more on reflecting and empathizing with your child before clarifying boundaries. For example, you might say, "I can see that you are very hurt and angry with me because I'm keeping you from your friends right now. Once you can cool down and get your homework done I would be happy to help you connect with them later."

6. Avoid power struggles by anticipating common conflicts and addressing them creatively. For example, if homework is a frequent battle, create a positive environment for your children by preparing a special snack, telling them that you understand homework is challenging, and offering to help them with tough assignments.

7. If your child has a pattern of physical aggression towards people or animals, destroys property, or has had problems breaking the law, then it is time to seek a trained mental health professional.

Oppositional behavior can take us to our limits. It also can create an opportunity to transform our families and renew them as the community of love that God intended them to be.