

# Manage Your Child's Defiant Behavior – 11 Guidelines

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The last 40 years of clinical research and family therapy have revealed principals that can make your job as a parent or caretaker more effective when it comes to managing the defiant behavior so characteristic of many growing and developing children. Being told what he or she can do and when to do it, naturally produces some resentment and testing of limits by a child who desires unlimited, unrestricted freedom.



A few helpful guidelines:

1. **Immediacy of Consequences:** After the occurrence of an undesirable behavior, provide negative consequences as immediately as possible. Likewise, when a child does something you like, provide an immediate reward. The younger the child, the more immediate the reward or punishment should be. In a young child, waiting even a few minutes can render a consequence ineffective.
2. **The Punishment should fit the “Crime”:** The consequence, be it verbal or social should be tailored to the transgression from the child’s point of view. Making a child go to bed early because he threw food at lunch may not make any sense to the child. However, withholding dessert would make sense and drive home the point that food throwing is not acceptable.
3. **Consistency of Consequences:** The consequences of a particular behavior should be consistent across settings, over time, and between parents. Inconsistency creates confusion and noncompliance with most children. Inconsistency between parents is an open invitation for the child to play one parent off against the other and develop manipulative behavior.
4. **Develop Rewards Systems Before Using Punishment:** Try to focus more attention on positive rather than negative behavior. Punishment appears to lose its effectiveness in a family environment that is devoid of positive incentives for appropriate conduct. By thinking more in terms of pro-social or appropriate behavior, you will find over time that you will become more creative at devising incentives for developing good habits in your child.
5. **Plan Ahead for Misbehavior:** Many parents are as impulsive in reacting to a child’s misbehavior as their child is to reacting to negative events. Anticipate the types of behavior that disrupt the family or worry you the most and create a well-organized, consistent, plan of attack. Trying to implement negative consequences spontaneously for a child’s drug abuse, not doing homework, having temper tantrums or fighting rarely work.
6. **Avoid Blaming Yourself or Your Child for Problem Behaviors:** Family dynamics are extremely complex. How you respond to your child can be

based on your child's temperament, prior childhood experiences, your child's physical attributes, personality and intelligence. Their genetics, siblings, peer pressure, "growing pains", and periods of poor fit between their personality and yours can influence your child's behavior. Because as mature adults and parents you are in the position to initiate a change in their behavior does not mean the problem is your fault.

7. **Experiment and Assume Your Behavioral Management Program is a Work in Progress:** No parent has a crystal ball and can know in advance what will or will not work. Using the principals outlined above; experiment. Be creative! Your child is always changing. Approaches that were effective last year may need to be changed. Rewards for an 8 year old may not work for a 10 year old.
8. **Never Criticize the Child, Criticize the Behavior:** Criticizing the child only tends to lower self-esteem and create a reduced ability to develop internal controls. Hurling judgmental terms at a child such as lazy, stupid, bad, evil, and disrespectful only serves to create distance between you and reduces your credibility in the long run. Nobody wants to listen to someone who they believe does not like or respect them. Tell Johnny he is a good, loveable kid but his throwing food behavior, using drugs, staying out past curfew, or punching a hole in the wall is unacceptable and needs to change. Convey how much you admire and care about him/her.
9. **When Possible, Look for the Pain and Frustration Behind the Defiant Inappropriate Behavior:** Share your own experiences if relevant. It lets your child know he or she is not alone with their issues. Find a safe "shame free zone" to discuss their pain and frustration. Encourage the expression of a full and wide range of emotions and let your child know that real men and women do cry and express their feelings.
10. **Give Comments Briefly, Directly and Without Ambivalence:** "Could you make your bed and pick-up your things" sounds like a question. This invites your child to comply or not to comply. "Make your bed and clean your room within the next hour" leaves little doubt to your request. Give commands with direct eye contact, a soft but firm voice, and without distractions such as the TV, loud music, or the computer.
11. **Express Your Love as Openly and Frequently as Possible:** Despite their limit testing and defiance, kids are usually more insecure, anxious, and depressed than they appear. Their sense of self and evaluation of their virtues or lack thereof, is constantly being challenged and in a state of flux. Peer pressure and criticism can be brutal.



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