

Coping with Defiance and Oppositional Behavior: Why It Happens, What to Do

Marco, 19 months, runs into the tunnel at the playground and stays there when his dad tells him it's time to leave.

Tanya, 32 months, refuses to have her cereal in the blue bowl. She insists that she needs the red one and if not, she won't be eating her breakfast.

It is a toddler's job to be oppositional. This is the period in your child's development when she begins to understand that she is separate from you and can exert some control over her world. One powerful way she can do this is by defying you. You say, "Do this," yet she says, "No!" The drive to assert one's self is useful as it motivates your child to want to make things happen. Being able to do some things for herself builds her confidence. The key is to find ways to show your child how she can be in control and make her own choices in positive ways.

It's important to keep in mind that some toddlers are simply, by nature, more likely to be oppositional than others. Children whose emotional reactions are big and intense, as well as children who are more cautious and timid, may be more oppositional than children who are temperamentally more easygoing and flexible. Why? Because these children tend to have a difficult time with changes, for example getting into the car seat, going to bed, or visiting a new place. Natural shifts in the day can also be stressful and result in a wide variety of protesting strategies from toddlers. To learn more about temperament and how you can support your child based on his individual approach to the world, visit our [Temperament](#) resources.

Think about:

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you adapt and apply the information below to your unique child and family.

- What does your child tend to be most oppositional about? What, if anything, do these things have in common?
- Why do you think these issues bring out your child's "oppositional" side? How can this understanding help you help your child cope better?
- How do you respond when your child is being defiant? What works? What doesn't? What can you learn from this?

Responding to Defiance and Oppositional Behavior: What You Can Do

Step 1: Think Prevention

Anticipate the kinds of situations that lead to defiance from your child and help him problem solve and cope in advance. This might mean letting your toddler know that you understand leaving the house to go to child care is difficult for him, and then offering him the choice of a book or toy to bring in the car to help him make the transition.

It can also be helpful to give children a warning before a transition needs to be made. You can use a kitchen timer so they can actually see and track the time. Making a poster of pictures that show the steps in your daily routines can be very useful as well. For example, pictures of tooth brushing, face washing, reading, and then bed show children what they can expect to happen next. For older toddlers, give some concrete cues about transitions, such as, "Three more times down the slide before it's time to go." It's very important to then follow through on your limit.

What's Going On With You?

- How do you handle your own feelings when your child acts out aggressively? Are you able to calm yourself before you respond?
- How effective do you feel you are in helping your child to manage her aggressive feelings? What works? What doesn't work? Why? What do you feel your child is learning from the way you respond when she is aggressive?

Step 2: Respond with Empathy and Set Clear Limits

Validate your child's feelings. As parents, we often skip this step and go right to setting the limit. But acknowledging a child's feelings *first* is very important as it lets her know you understand where she's coming from, and that her feelings matter. (Keep in mind that it's not the child's feelings that are the problem, it's what the child does with her feelings that is often the challenge.) For many children, it's this first step—empathy and validation—that helps them start to calm down. Labeling your toddler's feelings also helps her learn to be aware of her emotions and, eventually, to manage them. Keep language simple and direct: "I know you don't want to put your pajamas on. It's difficult to go from playtime to bedtime." When you skip this step, children often "pump up the volume" to show you—louder, harder, and stronger—just how upset they are. This is often when tantrums start.

After validating your child's feelings:

- Set the limit. "It is time for bed now. You need to sleep so your body can get some rest and grow big and strong." Use language your child understands. Keep it short and clear, but not threatening.
- Offer a few choices (which are acceptable to you). "Do you want to put your PJs on before or after we read books?" Or, "Do you want to put your PJs on or should daddy put them on for you?" You might also give a choice between two pairs of pajamas that he might want to wear. Giving choices offers children a chance to feel in control in positive ways. Giving choices can actually reduce defiance.

- Use humor. This is a great way to take some of the intensity out of the situation and throw a monkey wrench into a power struggle. You might try to pull your child's PJ bottoms over your head, or see if they fit onto her favorite stuffed animal.
- Engage your child's imagination. For a child refusing to go to bed: "Elmo is soooo tired. He wants to go to sleep and wants you to cuddle with him." Or, a child refusing to clean up: "Our favorite books want to go back on the shelf with their friends. Let's have a race to see how fast we can get them back up there."
- Enforce the limit: If none of the strategies above work, and your child is still digging in his heels, calmly and firmly set the limit. "You can get into the car seat or I can put you in. You decide." If your child resists, then (without anger) pick him up and strap him in. In a soothing tone of voice, you might say something like: "I know, you hate getting in the car seat. I understand." Or, just start talking about something totally unrelated to the tantrum. "Wow, look at that big doggie coming down the street." Or, "I wonder what you'll have for snack today at school."

The key is to *pay as little attention as possible* to your toddler's protests. Ignoring the behaviors you want to eliminate is the fastest way to be rid of them. (The only exception to this rule is if your child is being physically hurtful—hitting, slapping, punching, and so on—in which case you calmly but firmly stop the behavior and explain that he can feel mad but he cannot hit.)

- Avoid giving in. If you give in to tantrums, your child learns that if he pushes hard enough, he'll get what he wants. This will also make it more difficult for you the next time you try to enforce a limit.

Step 3: Think about your own behaviors: Could you be sending mixed messages to your child?

Sometimes our own choices and behavior as parents can influence our children's behaviors. Listed below are strategies to address two very common parenting dilemmas that often lead to tantrums or defiance with toddlers.

Avoid the "Okay?" pitfall. "Let's go to bed now, okay? Time to get dressed, okay?" Although this is a very common way that adults communicate, it is confusing for young children. They take your question at face value and think they have a choice to say, "No, I really would rather not go to bed right now." This can create unnecessary power struggles. Be sure to communicate what *is* and *isn't* a choice very clearly. "It is time to put on pajamas and get ready for bed. Do you want to wear the green or the red PJs?"

Think in advance about the limit you are going to set so that you can avoid changing your mind mid-stream. For example, one mom insisted her 2-year-old wear a long-sleeve shirt on a winter day. Her child started to protest because she wanted to wear her favorite short-sleeve shirt that day. About 5 minutes into the tantrum the mother realized that this was an unnecessary battle. Her daughter would be wearing a coat outside, and the child care center was heated. But she naturally worried, at this point, that "giving in" and allowing her daughter to wear the short-sleeve shirt would set a bad example; that it would teach her daughter that throwing a tantrum gets her what she wants. The easiest way to avoid this dilemma is to take a few seconds to think first before you act: "Is this a limit I really to need

to set?" (This is also known as "choosing your battles.")

Encourage turn-taking. As young as 6 and 9 months, babies can begin to engage in back-and-forth interactions. They also learn to imitate. This is a great time to encourage turn-taking as you talk and play with your baby as it helps her learn language and the joy of relationships. When you place a block in the bucket, give her time to copy you. Take turns putting objects in the bucket and dumping them out. As she gets older, take turns putting pieces in the puzzle, or shapes into the shape sorter. When it's time to clean up, you can make a game of taking turns placing toys back on the shelf. These experiences are opportunities for her to feel the pleasure of accomplishing something as a team.

Do chores together starting at an early age. Let your child grow up experiencing the benefits of cooperation. Even 1-year-olds can help set the table and clean up toys. Point out the advantages of cooperating: "Look how fast we set the table. Now we have time to read a book before dinner." Or, "Boy was it fun to wash the car with you. You are a great scrubber! Look how bright and shiny you made our car!"

Explain your reasons for family rules and helping each other out. By age 3, most children use and understand language well enough to handle simple explanations. Point out how rules benefit the whole family: "We all help clean up. Then we don't lose our toys and we can find them again." Or, "When you help me put away the laundry, I finish quicker and then we can play."

Take time to problem solve. You can help your older 2- and 3-year-olds come up with solutions to everyday dilemmas and encourage cooperation at the same time. First, state the problem. "You want to draw on the wall but mommy says no." Next, ask a question. "Where else could you draw?" Finally, problem-solve together. If your child can't think of an acceptable option, offer two choices, both of which are acceptable to you—perhaps drawing on paper or a cardboard box. If she insists on drawing on the refrigerator, set a limit: "I'll put the crayons away until we agree on a place to draw."

Give specific praise for cooperative efforts. Point out why and how your child's contribution was important. This helps her recognize and value her skills. "You picked out all the white socks and put them together. That helped me finish the laundry quicker. Now we have more time to play." Or, "You put the books away on the shelf. Now it's easier to choose one. Would you like me to read to you?"

Offer suggestions, not commands. Suggestions elicit cooperation. Commands often evoke resistance. "It is cold so you will need to wear a hat. Would you like help putting it on, or do you want to do it yourself?" This is likely to bring about a better response than saying, "Put on your hat."

Give your child choices while maintaining the rules. "Teeth need to be brushed at bedtime. Do you want me to brush your teeth first, or do you want to brush first?" Offering choices shows your child respect, and respect creates a sense of collaboration.

My 17-month-old has started yelling "No!" to every question I ask, even when it's something good like going to the park. Does she understand what this word means? How should I respond?

Although toddlers have varying grasps of the meaning of "No!" they understand its power because when they try it out themselves, it almost always elicits a big reaction. "Noooo!!!" gets an even bigger one. Nothing delights a toddler more than your attention, be it positive or

negative.

If your child is test driving the use of “No!” and her sense of power, take a breath, stand there, and do nothing. The most powerful and effective reaction to behavior you want to discourage is no reaction at all. Don’t take her literally because turning down a trip to the park is probably not what she means to do. She’s just testing to see what response she gets. So surprise her—tell her with a smile, “You are so good at saying ‘No’ loud and clear.” Or, try a silly response like saying “Bo! Mo! So!” in response to her “No!” It also helps to avoid asking her questions (“Are you ready for bed?”) that aren’t really a choice.

You're not alone. Most parents have experienced being in the middle of the grocery store with a toddler who is “melting down.” One of the biggest challenges of parenting is separating ourselves from our children’s behavior. When we react emotionally, we tend to be less effective than when we look at the situation objectively.

The rule of thumb when a child is losing it is to stay calm. Although this is no small task, having a big reaction when your child is “losing it” can prolong his tantrum. Remaining calm allows you to think more clearly and plan a response that is more likely to help him get back in control.

Next, acknowledge his feelings. “You really, really want that cupcake and are really, really mad that mom said no.” Remember, it’s not the feelings that are the problem, but how he is expressing his feelings. Until their feelings are acknowledged, most children will up the ante and act out even more intensely (e.g., public outburst) to show you just how mad they are. The first step in teaching your child how to effectively manage his strong feelings is to label them so he can become aware of and eventually learn to control them.

So how to gracefully handle your toddler's public meltdowns? Picture this: Your son starts screaming when it's time to leave the playground. You say, with compassion: “I know you want to keep playing and are sooo mad that we have to leave the playground.” Putting his feelings into words shows you understand. This often has a very soothing effect and also helps him ultimately learn self-control.

As he continues to scream, calmly continue taking steps to depart while remaining cool. Then set your limit with as little emotion as possible: “It's time to go.” If he refuses to get in the stroller or car seat, pick him up and place him in, firmly but not angrily. There is no reasoning with a child when he is out of control. The more stoic and matter of fact you can be (even as you use all your strength to strap him in!), the better. Completely ignore his screaming so he gets no attention for it. Instead, keep talking to him in a calm voice using very simple words, “I know, you’re having a hard time. That’s okay. . . . We are driving home for dinner now. Let’s see, what should we cook tonight?” Talking in a compassionate, soothing voice can be calming to him; and, just as important, it is a way to soothe yourself during this stressful time. (Another benefit of handling these incidents calmly and confidently is that it can prevent that unpleasant experience of hearing other adults around you offering criticism or unwanted advice about how to manage your child’s behavior!)

As unpleasant as tantrums can be, try to see them as opportunities to help your child learn to cope with difficult feelings—a skill that will help him all his life.
