

## **Dealing with Defiance**

“You can’t make me”. These are strong words for a child to say and nothing quite sparks the temper of an adult as hearing those words.

Why do children become defiant? They are defiant for the same reason that we adults become defiant. We “dig our heels in” when we feel helpless and powerless. We become belligerent when we want to go one way and the other person wants to go another. We become defiant because we want our way! When we can’t get our way, we puff up.

However, we can’t always let children have their way. We know that there are certain things that are necessary for children to do in order to be healthy and safe. They need to sleep and go to bed at a reasonable hour. They need to ride their bikes in safe places. They need to eat more than candy. Yet, they want to do otherwise and often dig their heels in as they proclaim, “You can’t make me”. And indeed, at those times we adults often feel a bit powerless ourselves. We may even feel defiant---and all of a sudden, we are in a power struggle with the child.

What can be done? First of all, remember that your child is a child. Defiance is a normal part of childhood. Secondly, keep your cool. Your own defiance and lose of control doesn’t help the situation. In fact, it can make things worse! If we as adults stomp off in anger, the child ‘gets’ to do what they wanted to do in the first place---and we lose prime parenting moments.

You can decrease the incidences of defiance by setting clear roles and rules. I recommend that families sit down together (as much as the child is able) and develop a list of household rules. These rules should not be too complicated and should be few in number (i.e. 3-5 rules at a time). Families should also discuss consequences, that is, what happens if the rules are not followed. There are a variety of consequences from which you can choose but the best are those that match the offense. For example, if your child rides his bike in the road after being instructed not to do so, the bike is taken away for a period of time. Remember that a child may test the limits, so be prepared to be consistent with reasonable consequences if family rules are ignored.

Often, defiance occurs during a transition period, i.e. when a child is moving from one activity to another. You can ease these times of transition by building in “free time”. Tell your child that one activity will end 10-15 minutes before you want them to begin the next task. For example, “It’s almost time for supper. You can play outside for another 15 minutes and then you need to come in to wash up”. Be sure to follow up with your child in another 10 minutes to provide a 5-minute warning, e.g. “You have 5 more minutes to play”.

It also is helpful to be clear in your language, that is, do not give choices where there are no choices. Often times, parents phrase things in a “polite” way. For instance, we might call children into supper by saying, “It’s almost time for supper. Don’t you want to come in now and eat?” The child, who really would prefer to ride his bike, says, “No”. We

have given choice where there is no choice. It is better to use a firm (and kind) tone of voice and instruct the child in the behaviors you want to see.

One final step that can be taken to prevent defiance is to invest time with your child. Many of us are busy with increasing work responsibilities and other activities. Even though some of the activities may be fun, we tend to rush children from place to place. Experience has shown that children who feel stressed or rushed or tired are more likely to be defiant. Spending quality time together can help. The investment need not consume large amounts of time each day. It can be as simple as a game of tag, reading a book together, or playing a few games of tic-tac-toe. It is that downtime---together---that helps children feel more connected to us...and a child that feels connected is more likely to be compliant with our requests!