

Responding to Defiance in the Moment

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Why Children Defy:

Unmet physical needs—When students are hungry or tired, they have less energy and it's harder for them to regulate their behavior.

Academic challenges—Some students refuse to do assignments to hide their fear or inability to do what's being asked, such as solving a math problem. They would rather be seen as defiant than incapable, especially in front of their peers.

A sense of belonging and significance—Children who struggle academically or socially may believe that they're "bad" students and thus are not valued. They may use defiance as a way to gain a sense of personal importance.

A need for more control—Sometimes what we say and do unintentionally diminishes a child's feelings of significance. If we find ourselves being too controlling with children who defy us, they may rebel even more—starting a frustrating cycle of our trying to impose more control and receiving back more defiance.

A need for more attention—Some children have learned that defiance can bring them extra attention from teachers and classmates—even if that attention is negative.

Testing limits—Testing limits is a natural part of childhood; some children may thoroughly test adults to find out where the limits are and whether we will keep our word.

Experiencing toxic stress—Children who experience toxic stress come to school on high alert. (In brief, toxic stress is when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity, such as physical or emotional abuse or chronic neglect.) These children quickly react when they sense that trouble is coming; they may talk back to

teachers, fight, and argue with peers.

The more we can focus on the underlying reasons students engage in defiance, the more we'll be able to maintain our cool in the moment when students act defiantly.

Early Signs of Distress in Children

Children who are defiant usually give clues that they're feeling distressed. If you can watch for these early signs, you can often tell when they may be headed toward a confrontation. Here are some typical warning signs:

- Shifting in seat
- Opening and closing fists
- Drumming on desk with fists/Fidgeting
- Slumping shoulders
- Crossing arms against chest
- Trouble making eye contact
- Verbal noises – coherent and incoherent

De-escalating Defiance in the Moment

Keep the child (and classmates) safe while giving the defiant child a chance to cool down. When a child is behaving defiantly, avoid responses that will heighten stress and invite more resistance. Don't expect that you can reason with the child or make an emotional appeal to get them to behave.

In the moment:

- **Avoid public confrontations**

When you publicly give redirections or consequences to a student who's challenging you, the stakes become higher for both of you. Public disagreements between you and the student can also harm a student's relationship with peers; classmates may label them as "bad" and avoid them as a result. Whenever possible, give reminders, redirections, and consequences privately. Doing so will help preserve your relationship with the student and their relationship with classmates.

- **Stay calm**

When you notice that a child is getting upset or refusing to do what you asked, first tell yourself to slow down. Don't rush to respond (unless to take immediate action for safety's sake). If you stay calm, you give the child more of an opportunity to calm down, too. Allow yourself a few seconds to pause or take a few slow, deep breaths. This will give you time to assess the situation calmly and objectively.

- **Respectfully remind or redirect**

Students who have difficulty cooperating can be especially sensitive to being "bossed around." Whether you're responding to early warning signs or full-blown defiance, use respectful words and an even tone. For example, to a child who's challenging your

directions, you might say, “Morgan, take a seat. You can read or draw for now.” Here are some more tips:

- **Be brief. Avoid lectures and sarcasm.**
- **Speak in a calm, matter-of-fact tone.**
- **Use short, direct statements.**
- **Don’t ask questions (unless you will accept any answer).**
- **Keep your body language neutral.**

- **Intervene as early as possible**

As soon as you notice early warning signs, respond to them with respectful reminders or redirections. If you wait until a student acts defiantly, they will be less capable of responding rationally to your directions.

- **Offer limited choices when possible**

Because children who struggle with defiance are often seeking power, it can help to offer them two options. By offering two options—not one “do this”—the child can hold on to a sense of significance while you remain consistent. This teaches the child (and the class) that the he is still being held accountable for his behavior. However, don’t expect immediate compliance. The child will likely need a minute or two to decide what to do.

- **Avoid negotiating in the moment or making further demands while escalated**

Negotiating during an incident will invite further testing. It also sends the message that children can avoid a consequence or redirection by resisting. If you find yourself in a power struggle, take a deep breath and disengage. Let the child (and the whole class, if they’re watching) know that you’re finished talking for now and will address the issue after the child calms down. For instance: “Max, we’re done talking for now. Everyone else, get your writing journals and start on your stories.”

- **Give children time and space to cool down**

Once children start to refuse directions or speak angrily to adults, they’re likely in the “fight or flight” mindset and can’t think rationally. Whenever possible, avoid any discussion until the child has completely calmed down. Consider ways to help the child regain self-control. For example, gross motor movement, such as taking a walk or getting a drink of water, may help more than having the child sit still.

- **Reflect on What’s Working and What’s Not**

It’s worth taking some time after an incident of defiance to take a step back and reflect: Are your expectations for yourself or the child simply too high? Is there another approach you haven’t tried that might help?

The main objective in responding in the moment is to keep the child and other students safe. However, in-the-moment responses play a limited role in helping children develop prosocial skills such as cooperation, empathy, and self-control. Helping a child develop

these **prosocial skills** can go a long way to reducing acts of defiance. After all, the ultimate goal of discipline is to help a child develop these and other social-emotional skills that are essential to their success in school—and in life.