



Behavior Management Series -Issue#6

Why Children Defy Authority

Academic Possibilities: Children with a history of failure and academic insecurity may lash out at those they perceived created the problem. Anger directed at school authorities may be displaced feelings of inadequacy and frustration that have no other outlet.

Environmental Possibilities: Children who come from certain parenting styles may experience a lack of involvement with authority, boundaries, consistent rules and consequences. When this occurs, children never incorporate the internal parent which guides our conscience and internalizes rules of society. Consequently these children may lack any fear of authority and may be guided by their own rules and reality which often get them into trouble. Other children who come from violent or abusive homes may defy authority as a means of displaced anger.

Intellectual Possibilities: Sometimes children with limited intellectual ability may lack the ability to understand cause and affect consequences or understand levels of authority. As a result they react to all authority the same.

Language Possibilities: Not Applicable

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Psychological Possibilities: In a milder form, defiance of authority may be exhibited by highly anxious children who are so tense that they are not fully aware of their behavior, its consequences, and the level of authority of the people involved.

In more severe forms, some children defy authority as a result of an Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder. Oppositional Defiant Disorder is usually characterized by patterns of negativistic, hostile and defiant behaviors with peers as well as adults. This disorder is considered less serious than a conduct disorder because of the absence of serious behaviors which violate the basic rights of others. Children with this disorder usually exhibit argumentative behaviors towards adults which may include swearing and frequent episodes of intense anger and annoyance. These symptoms are usually considered to be more serious and intense than those exhibited by other children of the same age. The behaviors associated with Oppositional Defiant Disorder usually appear around age 8 and usually not later than early adolescence.

Teachers who have children with this disorder in their classes may observe low frustration tolerance, frequent temper outbursts, low sense of confidence, and an unwillingness to take responsibility for their actions, consistent blaming of others for their own mistakes or problems, and frequent behaviors associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.

Conduct Disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern of behavior which intrudes and violates the basic rights of others without concern or fear of implications. This pattern is not selective and is exhibited in the home, at school, with peers and in the child's community. Other behaviors present with this condition may include vandalism, stealing, physical aggression, cruelty to animals and fire setting. Empirical studies seem to indicate that 9% of the males and 2% of all females suffer from this disorder. The age of onset is usually before puberty for males and after puberty for females. The causes of these disorders are varied, but include parental rejection, harsh discipline, early institutional residence, and inconsistent parenting figures as experienced in foster care.

Children with this condition may be physically confrontational to teachers and peers, have poor attendance, have high levels of suspension thereby missing a great deal of academic work and exhibit other forms of antisocial behavior.

Social Possibilities: Children may defy authority as a result of peer pressure or the strong need to be accepted by a peer group or gang that prides itself on antisocial behavior and defiance of authority.

What to Do When This Happens

- The approach suggested here has three parts. The first is to set boundaries around the inappropriate behavior, the second is to sit with the child and find out what the need is to defy authority and the third part is helping the child change behavior patterns.
- The first part includes sitting with the child alone with no other students around. Keeping in mind that defiance of authority is not a sign of strength, but a sign of a fragile ego, do not hesitate establishing yourself as the benevolent authority.
- While you understand that he may have issues that cause him to act this way, and you will help him try to understand them, you will not tolerate this behavior.
- Discuss the seriousness of the situation, and the consequences if it continues.
- For the second part you may want to try to help the child understand the reasons why he is defiant. Try to get him to verbalize what he is feeling or why he does what he does. If he is unable to verbalize or label his feelings you may want to provide him with some labels for what he may be feeling. For example, you may want to say that in the past you have noticed that other children who defy authority have done so because they feel they are not doing well in school, have problems at home or feel rejected by other students.
- If this is a consistent pattern of behavior on the part of any student, talk to the school psychologist about setting up a meeting with the parent(s). This will provide the parents with what has been happening in the classroom, provide you with getting feedback on issues at home that may be contributing to the situation, and offer parents specific parenting skills which may help all involved.

- Develop a behavioral contract explaining what is expected of this student in the classroom with rewards and punishments for either following or not following through. This contract is something a school psychologist should be well trained in developing.
 - If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.
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Why Children Become Depressed

Academic Possibilities: Years of academic struggle and failure can have adverse affects upon a child's self worth and feelings of hopelessness. This pattern could result in some forms of depression.

Environmental Possibilities: Family patterns of depression, extreme family stress over long periods of time, family illness, constant parental fighting, severe economic pressure effecting the family structure may all contribute to feelings of depression and hopelessness for some children.

Intellectual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Language Possibilities: Not being able to express oneself can be tremendously frustrating for children. Because of this, when they become upset, they may not be able to put into words how much they are hurting. Since the language ability is problematic, this may result in depression.

Medical Possibilities: One of the theories regarding depression is that it results from a biochemical imbalance.

Perceptual Possibilities: Imagine not seeing the world in which everyone else does. Think about what it would feel like if everyone in the class saw one thing but you just could not perceive it. Your vision was fine but you could not make out what it was everyone could see. This is what children with perceptual problems experience daily. After a while, their frustrations have no outlet and may be turned inward possibly causing depression.

Psychological Possibilities: There are many reasons for depression in childhood. Depression is something that everyone may experience at one time or another. However, a pattern of depressed mood is always a concern.

Dysthymia is a chronic disturbance of the individual's moods involving chronic depression or irritable mood for a period of one year for children and adolescents. There are so many psychological triggers which may result in depression. The key is to realize the signs. The signs of depression may include poor appetite, difficulty sleeping, low energy, general fatigue, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating and feelings of hopelessness.

Social Possibilities: Some children may experience levels of depression arising from social isolation, rejection, intimidation or victimization over a period of time. This depression may stem from lowered feelings of social self worth and a lack of social connection.

What to Do When This Happens

Since depression in children is a very serious and often complex issue and can be exhibited in many forms, we strongly recommend that if you suspect that a child is depressed you immediately seek out consultation with the school psychologist and the principal for purposes of the child's safety, your liability, the school's liability, and the parent's rights.

Why Children Destroy Their Work

Academic Possibilities: Children with poor academic self esteem may be extremely critical of their work to the point that destroying it prevents confronting another possibility of failure. They may start out with a desire to do the assignment. However, the tension from either not understanding it, getting it wrong, or believing that it will be criticized may result in this behavior pattern.

Environmental Possibilities: Children who come from overly critical homes may resort to this action as a result of displaced anger. Other children may resort to this to prevent critical parents or assumed criticism from occurring.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with low intellectual ability may destroy their work because it is always poor which causes great frustration and embarrassment.

Language Possibilities: Children who have difficulties understanding the language either because they are impaired or bilingual may resort to this behavior as a frustration in not understanding what is being said.

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Psychological Possibilities: Children with lowered self esteem tend to distort perception and tend to see things in a more negative manner than may be reality. If a child has low self esteem, he will usually have a more fragile ego or sense of self. This fragile state cannot tolerate criticism in any form, comments in any form, or suggestions in any form. All of these actions by others are seen as an indication of extreme inadequacy by the child and as a result, he may destroy his work to ward off facing such comments.

Other children who are perfectionists may resort to this action since nothing they do satisfies them.

Social Possibilities: Fear of social ridicule and embarrassment may force a child to destroy his work.

What to Do When This Happens

- The first thing to do is to sit with the child alone with no other students around. Keep in mind that destroying one's work is a sign of inadequacy. As a result the child needs a great deal of reassurance and nurturance at this time, not criticism. Remember that no child wants to fail. This child may not have the skills or understanding of how to repair or cope with his issues.
 - Discuss the seriousness of the situation, and the consequences to his self esteem and reputation with his classmates if it continues.
 - Try to get him to verbalize what he is feeling or why he does what he does. If he is unable to verbalize or label his feelings you may want to provide him with some labels for what he may be feeling.
 - Suggest to this student alternate means of resolving his frustration. Many students who consistently destroy their work know no other alternative in handling difficult and stressful situations. They need to be educated on other means of response.
 - If this is a consistent pattern of behavior on the part of any student, talk to the school psychologist about setting up a meeting with the parent(s). This will provide the parents with what has been happening in the classroom, provide you with getting feedback on issues at home that may be contributing to the situation, and offer parents specific parenting skills which may help all involved.
 - Develop a behavioral contract explaining what is expected of this student in the classroom with rewards and punishments for either following or not following through. This contract is something a school psychologist should be well trained in developing.
 - If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.
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Why Children Have Difficulty Following Written Directions

Academic Possibilities: The most obvious reason behind this behavior would be a lack of reading comprehension or decoding skills.

Environmental Possibilities: Not Applicable

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with low intellectual ability often have trouble with written directions since they may find them confusing, overwhelming or too complicated.

Language Possibilities: Children with language disabilities or bilingual children will often have great difficulties with written assignments. It may be difficult for a bilingual student to read directions in English and think in his native language and then revert back to an English response.

Medical Possibilities: The most obvious factor here would be poor eyesight which may hinder a child's ability to clearly understand written directions.

Perceptual Possibilities: Some children with visual perceptual problems may have difficulty processing information and providing adequate responses. When presented with written directions that contain more than one direction, these children may become confused since certain processes like internal organization; memory and so on may be impaired.

Psychological Possibilities: Some psychological states of tension can result in a pattern of holding back known as passive resistance. This can lead to an unconscious need not to follow any form of directions given by an authority figure. Anxiety may be the cause of confusion often seen in a not being able to understand directions in any form.

Social Possibilities: Not Applicable

What to Do When This Happens

- After contacting the parents and informing them of your concerns, request that the child's vision be checked to make sure this is not the primary cause of the lack of understanding.
- Be honest with yourself and check to see if other children may be having the same problem with understanding directions. If that is the case, then you may want to review your written directions or break them down into shorter and simpler parts.
- Contact the school psychologist to determine if there are any extenuating circumstances that might be creating tension. Tension reduces the available space for memory and concentration which could have a direct effect upon remembering directions.
- Contact the educational evaluator and ask her to screen the child. It is possible that even though the vision is fine, the child may have any of a number of visual processing problems.
- If the above issues are ruled out, then it can be assumed that the child has the ability to follow directions. In this case, try the following techniques:
 - o 1.) Talk to the child and get the child's perception of what is going on.
 - o 2.) Ask him what is giving him the greatest difficulties and if he has any suggestions about how you can be of help.
 - o 3.) Avoid multi-written directions.
 - o 4.) Verbal give directions along with the written directions for the child and see if that helps.
 - o 5.) Determine whether or not the child's inability to follow directions is based on opposition and defiance rather than any type of visual problem. If you believe it is more of a psychological problem, establish certain reinforcement or consequence for following or not following directions. If the child then follows through, compliment and reward him with verbal praise. If he does not, enforce an appropriate and fair consequence.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.

Why Some Children Have Difficulty Following Verbal Directions

Academic Possibilities: Fear of academic failure or not being able to understand concepts may cause a child to “not understand” directions as a rationalization for not doing something. Further, for some children, following directions in school can create great difficulty. Academically, there are students who do not understand what words mean or how to interpret the meaning of the directions. Their delays in reading decoding, reading rate, and reading comprehension may therefore cause problems with following directions in all areas of life.

Environmental Possibilities: Children who come from overly critical, dysfunctional or abusive homes may develop high levels of tension. This tension will then impair their ability to concentrate and remember. Also, some children are “loose cannons” at home. In a sense, they run the show. As such, their parents have lost all control over the rules of the house. These children learn that they do not have to follow directions because there are no consequences when they don’t follow through. This learning then gets carried over into many other situations, especially school, when having to follow directions is essential.

Intellectual Possibilities: Some children with limited intellectual ability usually have secondary difficulties with memory, retention, comprehension, and/or language. All these factors may interfere with a child’s ability to understand directions, especially those that involve several steps.

Language Possibilities: Certain types of receptive language disorders may make it difficult for children to understand, comprehend, retain and follow through on directions. Also, if a child has difficulty with language comprehension, it is inevitable that following directions will be extremely difficult. Not being able to read what a passage says to do or auditory understand what a teacher says to do makes following directions nearly impossible.

Medical Possibilities: Certain types of medications can impair a child’s ability to remember things or concentrate. It is possible that some children have neurological problems which may create processing problems with respect to understanding and following directions. Also, difficulties with a child’s hearing may be at the root of this pattern.

Perceptual Possibilities: Certain types of perceptual deficits, especially those affecting memory and auditory perception, may greatly interfere in a child’s ability to understand and process directions. Further, if a child sees things from different perspectives than others or hears them but cannot discriminate what is being said, it becomes quite possible that understanding directions and following them will be extremely difficult to do.

Psychological Possibilities: High levels of anxiety can interfere directly with memory. As anxiety goes up, memory and concentration go down. Consequently, the ability to retain directions may be impaired. Also, for some children, they simply do not follow directions because of complete opposition to authority. Following directions means having to do what others want him to do. For some children, they cannot accept this, and will defiantly struggle against all forms of structure and organization. Their inability to follow directions is not a matter of “can’t” but more so of “not wanting to do so”.

Social Possibilities: Many times, due to peer pressure, children will not follow directions because everyone else is not following them. If a particular child knows what everyone is doing is wrong, he may follow the pack simply because following directions would go against the norm, something children can be very scared to do.

What to Do When This Happens

- After contacting the parents and informing them of your concerns, request that the child's hearing be checked to make sure this is not the primary cause of the lack of understanding.
- Be honest with yourself and check to see if other children may be having the same problem with understanding directions. If that is the case, then you may want to review your directions or break them down into shorter and simpler parts.
- Contact the school psychologist to determine if there are any extenuating circumstances that might be creating tension. Tension reduces the available space for memory and concentration which could have a direct effect upon remembering directions.
- Contact the speech/language therapist and ask him to screen the child. It is possible that even though the hearing is fine, he may have any of a number of language and/or auditory processing problems.
- If the above issues are ruled out, then it can be assumed that the child has the ability to follow directions. In this case, try the following techniques:
 - o 1.) Talk to the child and get the child's perception of what is going on.
 - o 2.) Ask him what is giving him the greatest difficulties and if he has any suggestions about how you can be of help.
 - o 3.) Avoid multi-directions.
 - o 4.) Write down directions for the child and see if that helps.
 - o 5.) Determine whether or not the child's inability to follow directions is based on opposition and defiance rather than any type of language or medical problem. If you believe it is more of a psychological problem, establish certain reinforcement or consequences for following or not following directions. If the child then follows through, compliment and reward him with verbal praise. If he does not, enforce an appropriate and fair consequence.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.