

Supporting Students with Oppositional and Defiant Behaviors

Building Positive Relationships While Maintaining High Expectations

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports educators in understanding and responding effectively to students who demonstrate oppositional, defiant, or resistant behaviors in the classroom. These behaviors may include arguing, refusing directions, blaming others, intentionally avoiding tasks, challenging authority, or becoming easily frustrated when expectations are placed upon them.

While these behaviors can be disruptive and challenging, they are often a form of communication. Students may be seeking control, avoiding difficult tasks, expressing frustration, coping with skill deficits, or responding to past experiences that have impacted their trust in adults.

The purpose of this guide is to help educators:

- Understand the underlying causes of oppositional behaviors
 - Reduce power struggles and escalation
 - Build positive teacher-student relationships
 - Teach replacement behaviors and self-regulation skills
 - Create a classroom environment that promotes success
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Instructional Outcomes

Teachers will be able to:

- Recognize common characteristics of oppositional and defiant behavior
 - Identify potential triggers and contributing factors
 - Use proactive strategies to prevent escalation
 - Respond effectively to challenging behaviors
 - Promote student accountability while preserving relationships
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Understanding Oppositional and Defiant Behaviors

Students displaying oppositional behaviors may:

- Frequently argue with adults
- Refuse to follow directions
- Challenge classroom rules
- Blame others for mistakes
- Become easily frustrated
- Avoid academic tasks
- Display anger when corrected
- Engage in attention-seeking behaviors

It is important to remember that these behaviors often reflect a need for support rather than simply a willingness to misbehave.

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Before responding to behavior, consider:

Academic Factors

- Is the work too difficult?
- Does the student have skill gaps?
- Is the student overwhelmed by the task?

Emotional Factors

- Is the student experiencing anxiety or stress?
- Are there social concerns impacting behavior?
- Is the student struggling with emotional regulation?

Environmental Factors

- Are expectations clear?
- Are routines predictable?
- Are there frequent transitions or disruptions?

Understanding the "why" behind behavior helps educators choose more effective responses.

Proactive Strategies That Support Success

Strategy	Purpose	Classroom Example
Provide Choices	Increases student ownership	"Would you like to complete the first five problems now or after the example?"
Build Relationships	Increases trust and cooperation	Daily positive check-ins with the student
Pre-Correct Expectations	Prevents problem behaviors	Review expectations before independent work begins
Use Calm Communication	Reduces escalation	Speaking privately and respectfully during corrections
Break Tasks into Smaller Steps	Reduces frustration and avoidance	Completing one section at a time instead of an entire assignment

Real Classroom Scenarios

Scenario 1: Refusal to Begin Work

A student folds their arms and says:

"I'm not doing this."

Ineffective Response

Teacher:

"You need to do it because I said so."

Result: Student becomes more resistant and argumentative.

Effective Response

Teacher:

"It looks like you're having a hard time getting started. Let's begin with the first question together."

Result: Student feels supported and is more likely to engage.

Scenario 2: Arguing About Directions

Teacher asks the class to begin a writing assignment.

Student responds:

"Why do we always have to do writing? This is stupid."

Effective Response

Teacher:

"I hear that you're frustrated. Let's talk after directions are finished. Right now, I need everyone to get started."

Result: Teacher avoids a public power struggle and redirects attention to the task.

Scenario 3: Escalating During Correction

A student becomes defensive when corrected.

Effective Response

Teacher:

"Everyone makes mistakes. Let's figure out how we can fix this together."

Result: Student is more likely to remain regulated and accept feedback.

Strategies for Reducing Power Struggles

Teachers should:

Avoid

- Public confrontations
- Threats or ultimatums
- Arguing back and forth
- Taking comments personally
- Escalating emotions

Instead

- Stay calm and neutral
- Offer limited choices
- Use private conversations when possible

- Focus on solutions
- Reinforce positive behavior

Remember:

The goal is not to win the argument. The goal is to teach and support appropriate behavior.

Teaching Replacement Skills

Students often need explicit instruction in:

- Asking for help appropriately
- Managing frustration
- Accepting feedback
- Following directions
- Problem-solving
- Self-advocacy

Example:

Instead of:

"I'm not doing this."

Teach:

"Can I have help getting started?"

Student Reflection Tool

After a challenging situation, students can reflect:

What happened?

How was I feeling?

What choice did I make?

What could I try next time?

Who can help me when I feel frustrated?

Teacher Reflection

Consider the following:

- ☐ Have I identified possible triggers for the behavior?
 - ☐ Am I building positive interactions with the student daily?
 - ☐ Do I provide opportunities for student choice?
 - ☐ Am I avoiding unnecessary power struggles?
 - ☐ Have I taught replacement behaviors?
 - ☐ Is my response helping the student learn new skills?
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Connection to IEP Goals and Behavior Supports

Students with oppositional and defiant behaviors often benefit from:

- behavior intervention plans (BIPs)
- self-regulation goals
- social-emotional learning supports
- positive reinforcement systems
- structured routines and expectations

Instructional and behavioral supports should work together to promote long-term success.

Closing Reflection

Students who demonstrate oppositional and defiant behaviors often require more than consequences they require understanding, consistency, and skill-building opportunities. By focusing on relationships, proactive supports, and teaching replacement behaviors, educators can reduce conflict, increase engagement, and help students develop the tools needed to succeed both academically and socially.

Quick Reminder for Educators

Ask yourself:

"What skill is this student missing, and how can I teach it?"

This shift from punishment to problem-solving often leads to the most meaningful and lasting behavior change.