“Parenting the Defiant Child”
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Acknowledgment:

This article features text taken from the “Unraveling The Defiant Child” training. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Recco S. Richardson, Recco S. Richardson Consulting, Inc., 6309 N. Saginaw Street, Flint, MI 48505. Electronic mail may be sent to: recco@richardsonsconsulting.com.

The full training of this article is available on compact disc on our website: www.richardsonsconsulting.com.

General Review:

Children who may have been born with a difficult temperament or some type of biological predisposition, appear to have an increased risk for defiant and oppositional behavior toward parents (Frick & Morris, 2004). According to Hawkins et al. (2000), children who at an early age display ongoing stubbornness, agitation, poor behaviors and difficulties are at a higher risk of future psychiatric diagnoses and becoming offending adults.

As a societal problem, defiance, oppositional and conduct disorder has not been focused on as a childhood crisis. The focus has been on dilemmas regarding foster care, special education, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, high school drop out rates and youth suicides. The lack of focus on defiance and oppositionalism is witnessed in funding level disparity. In 1990, the average cost of treating defiance was only $15,000 per youth (Foster & Jones, 2006). This is less than the $25,000-$40,000 per year spent to service a single youth placed in foster care or residential programming.

When school-age children regularly display counter-productive behaviors, the entire family and school setting can be disrupted. At the core of most disruptive behaviors displayed by children are an unhealthy need for control, inappropriate levels of anger, and a general disregard for others. These and other disruptive behaviors lead us to label the child as defiant. Defiant behaviors are often the by-product of other issues going on in the life of a child. The defiance is a response or attempt to resolve inner conflicts.

In the counseling field, the recurrent pattern of negativity, denial, and placing blame is referred to as oppositional defiant disorder. This disorder also features a child’s decision to test limits, violate social/family norms, invade the personal space/basic rights of others, defy rules, argue, annoy and resort to hostility and manipulation as a means of functioning. By far, the defiant child is one of the most difficult children to parent.
Parenting Perspective:

To avoid undue levels of frustration and anguish, it behooves parents to understand that defiance by a child is a choice. The pressure for a parent to perform or fix the problems presented by the child is addressed by first realizing that in a “perfect world or when given everything they desire,” the defiant child may still choose to be a thorn in the flesh. The parenting goal is not to give in or to become frustrated; rather the goal is to address the child’s rage, indignation, and wrath.

Six Parenting Steps:

There are several “consistent” steps that parents can take to address a child’s defiance.

Step #1: Realize You Are Not Alone

The first step for parents to take is to realize that they are not alone. In my years of private practice counseling, I have found that when parents truly realize that they are not alone, their level of frustration decreases even before improved childhood behaviors are witnessed. I find myself regularly informing parents that “You are not alone. There are millions of good parents throughout the world experiencing the same level of defiance from their child.”

Childhood defiance is a world-wide problem. In a recent study, Rescola et al (2007) reported on teacher’s reports of the behavioral and emotional problems of 30,000 students from 21 countries. The countries in the study included Thailand, Italy, China, Portugal, Denmark, U.S.A., and Greece. The teachers reported on defiance, thought problems, social problems, perfectionism, task completion, anxiety, depression, impulsiveness, non-compliance, etc. They reported that all the children had similar home and school related problems.

The research study referred to drives home the point that as a parent, you are not the only one parenting a defiant child.

Step #2: Expose The Root

The second step is to expose the root cause of a child’s behaviors. No one likes to be exposed. It is a very uncomfortable feeling. A good solid heart-to-heart talk with a child regarding the cause and root of their defiance sets the tone for improved childhood behaviors. The act of exposing lets the child know that their “issues” have been identified and a plan of action is being developed. The act of exposing also implies to the child that the expectation is for them to “surrender” and to do better.
Step #3: Displace The Anger

The third step for parents to take is assisting the child in replacing their anger, rage and displeasure with forgiveness and peace. This is a critical step that can take a while to establish because defiance almost acts and functions as if the child has been “poisoned” with insatiable needs. I have found that such “poisoning” requires intentional and on-going discussions with the child regarding moving on emotionally, not holding grudges, accepting others and their faults, etc.

Step #4: The Use of Consequences

The fourth step for parents to take is imposing consequences. When implemented consistently, consequences have the ability to help children improve their behaviors. The most effective consequences for the defiant child are not being grounded, removal of privileges or public embarrassment. Rather, I have found that consequences that stretch the child past their comfort zone are effective. Also, I have found that consequences that produce the “feeling” of disappointing others, remorse, and apathy/empathy are effective in curbing defiant behaviors.

Step #5: Parent Training

The fifth step for parents to take is to secure more training. I have found that parent training and securing new information accounts for more than 30 percent of the solution to childhood defiance. According to Kazdin and Whitley (2006) and Hughes and Obeldobel (2007), an effective parent training class features instruction and activities on problem solving, parental adjustment, and marital/singlehood satisfaction.

The enrollment in parenting training opportunities is a difficult step for parents to take. Some parents describe such an act as humiliating, unnecessary, beneath them and filled with empty promises. I have found that this may or may not be true. However, it only stands to reason that if driver’s education classes, ministerial training and life guard classes are a necessary “evil” and help to provide competence, then surely a parenting class here and there would be beneficial to parents.

For critical cases, I have found myself providing parents with one-on-one parenting classes. The focus of these intense and very effective sessions tend to be the parent’s own level of depression, childhood trauma, stressors, communication style, etc.

Step #6: Remove Socioeconomic Barriers

The sixth step for parents to take is probably the most difficult. To effectively parent and resolve a child’s defiance and oppositionalism, socioeconomic barriers such as poverty and poor housing must be addressed by parents. The defiant child has a need to see their parents making concerted efforts to break the grip and sting
of insufficient income, unstable housing, frequent moving, unstable parental relationships, violence and crime.

**Specific Parenting Strategies:**

I would be remiss to not provide specific parenting strategies that can be implemented. I utilize these strategies with my own children and with the children at our local church.

- Teach them how to negotiate their emotions and experiences
- Show them how to delay the need for immediate gratification
- Impress upon them the need to feel, emote, and process
- Share with them human nature tendencies and self-preservation
- Discuss with them how to self-regulate and calm themselves down
- At an early age, help them to communicate their hurts, needs and desires
- Encourage them to problem-solve and move forward
- Share with them how to build healthy relationships with others
- Introduce them to acts of kindness and gentleness

**References:**


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