

The Disobedient Child

What can be done about a chronically disobedient child?

From time to time most children defy the wishes of their parents. This is a part of growing up and testing adult guidelines and expectations. It is one way for children to learn about and discover their own selves, express their individuality, and achieve a sense of autonomy. As they stretch their independent wings and engage in minor conflicts with their parents, they discover the boundaries of their parents' rules and of their own self-control.



Sometimes, however, these conflicts are more than occasional disturbances and become a pattern for how parents and children interact. Disobedience can have a variety of causes. At times, it is due to unreasonable parental expectations. Or it might be related to the child's temperament, or to school problems, family stress, or conflicts between his parents.

What parents can do

When you have a chronically disobedient child, examine the possible sources of his inner turmoil and rebelliousness. If this has been a persistent pattern that has continued into middle childhood, closely evaluate your own family situation:

- How much respect do your family members show for one another?
- Do they respect one another's privacy, ideas, and personal values?
- How does the family work out its conflicts?
- Are disagreements resolved through rational discussion, or do people regularly argue or resort to violence?
- What is your usual style of relating to your child, and what forms does discipline usually take?
- How much spanking and yelling is there?
- Do you and your child have very different personalities and ways of getting along in the world that cause friction between you?
- Is your child having trouble succeeding at school or developing friendships?
- Is the family undergoing some especially stressful times?

If your child has only recently started to demonstrate disrespect and disobedience, tell him that you have noticed a difference in his behavior and that you sense he is unhappy or struggling. With his help, try to determine the specific cause of his frustration or upset. This is the first step toward helping him change his behavior.

Your reaction matters

If you react to your child's talking back by exploding or losing your temper, he will respond with disobedience and disrespect. By contrast, he will become more obedient when you remain calm, cooperative, and consistent. He will learn to be respectful if you are respectful toward him and others in the family. If he becomes disobedient and out of control, impose a timeout until he calms down and regains self-control.

When your child is obedient and respectful, compliment him for that behavior. Reward the behavior you are seeking, including cooperation and resolution of disagreements. These positive efforts will always be much more successful than punishment.



When to seek additional help

For some disobedient children, you may need to obtain professional mental health treatment. Here are some situations where outside counseling may be necessary:

- If there is a persistent, long-standing pattern of disrespect of authority both at school and at home.
- If the patterns of disobedience continue in spite of your best efforts to encourage your child to communicate his negative feelings
- If a child's disobedience and/or disrespect is accompanied by aggressiveness and destructiveness
- If a child shows signs of generalized unhappiness -- perhaps talking of feeling blue, unliked, friendless, or even suicidal
- If your family has developed a pattern of responding to disagreements with physical or emotional abuse
- If you or your spouse or child use alcohol or other drugs to feel better or cope with stress

If relationships within your family show signs of difficulty and lack of cooperation, then family therapy may be indicated. By dealing with and resolving these problems at a young age, you can minimize and even prevent more serious struggles that may emerge as your children reach adolescence. The key is early identification and treatment.

Last Updated 11/2/2009

Source Caring for Your School-Age Child: Ages 5 to 12 (Copyright © 2004 American Academy of Pediatrics)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

