



6 Strategies for Increasing Positive Behaviors in Children

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One of the most common presenting issues in outpatient mental health treatment centers is child noncompliance which can be defined as, "the refusal to initiate or complete a request made by an authority figure or the failure to follow a previously stated rule." In fact, 50% or more of parents, in general, report problems with noncompliance, and it is possible that this estimate is even higher given that many parents may be hesitant to admit that they struggle with noncompliant children.

One of the many reasons that child noncompliance is important is that it is very predictive of the development of future behavior problems including Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD). ODD is diagnosed when a child shows a pattern of angry and/or irritable moods, argumentative and defiant behaviors, or signs of vindictiveness towards others. CD is a more serious behavior disorder involving a repetitive and very persistent pattern of violating the basic rights of others or societal norms including aggression towards people or animals, destruction of property, and theft or lying. In both of these disorders, children struggle with age-appropriate self-regulation of emotions and/or behaviors that lead to the children being in conflict with authority figures.

There are four types of noncompliance, two of which are the most predictive of behavior disorders later in the child's development.

1. *Direct defiance* occurs when a child evidences anger and defiance while not complying with the request or rule. An example of this would be the child angrily screaming, "No way! YOU DO IT!" when a parent requests, "Put your clothes away."

2. *Passive noncompliance* involves children blatantly ignoring an authority figure and acting as if the command or rule never existed. If a parent says, "Time for dinner! Turn off the video game!", and the child doesn't respond and continues playing, this child would be passively noncomplying.

3. *Simple noncompliance* is similar to direct defiance but lacks the child's anger or blatant defiance. When an authority figure makes a request, the child may politely state his or her position and reason for not wanting to comply. If a parent asks a child to brush his or her teeth, the child might say, "I don't need to brush my teeth. I did it this morning." In this example, the child is calm yet is still refusing to comply.

4. *Negotiation* involves a child bargaining, reasoning, or negotiating with adults when they don't want to follow rules or commands. Many of us have heard children saying something to the effect of, "Just 5 more minutes? I promise. Just 5 more minutes!" Behind their strategies for getting what they want is noncompliance with the original request.

Researchers in the field report that direct defiance and

passive noncompliance in young children are the most predictive of future behavior disorders that require interventions. Research also shows that early interventions (arguably prevention plans) reduce the likelihood of these behaviors rising to the level of a disorder.

Behavioral parent training (BPT) is an evidence-based treatment designed specifically for noncompliance and disruptive behaviors. Often, the parent-child relationship plays a crucial role in the development and maintenance of children's behaviors (both positive and negative), and BPT strategies target improving the parent-child relationship so that children increase positive behaviors and reduce negative behaviors.

Here are 6 evidence-based strategies adults can use to manage children's defiant behaviors:

1. Catch the Child Behaving Appropriately.

One of the best defenses is a good offense. I often remind adults about the amount of time and effort they are spending addressing children's negative behaviors and simply suggest that, at first, we forget about this time commitment and instead use that time wisely. Most children love adult attention and will often behave for the very purpose of getting adult attention (positive or negative). Challenge yourself to try and find the child engaging in any positive behaviors and give the child your positive attention.

2. Give the Child Labeled Praise.

Now that you're noticing the child engaging in positive behaviors, you want to *immediately, frequently, and consistently* let the child know specifically what it is that you like. Adults often use phrases like "Great job" but don't specify what it was that pleased them. A better phrase would be, "Great job putting your toys away!" so that the child knows exactly what he or she did that was "great."

3. Use Active Ignoring for Attention-Seeking Misbehaviors.

When children become used to getting attention for their misbehaviors, those misbehaviors are going to recur (because, well, they work!). If adults begin to ignore those attention-seeking misbehaviors, eventually, the child should learn that those misbehaviors are not effective anymore, and those behaviors should decrease. The reason that this is called *active ignoring* is because adults should still be looking for the child to behave appropriately (see strategies #1 and #2). Once the child discontinues the misbehavior and engages in any appropriate behavior, the adult should immediately use labeled praise.

4. Use Effective Commands.

While an entire article can be written on giving effective commands, there are a few major themes that can be highlighted. One of the most important points to make about commands is adult follow through. If an adult gives a command but does not ensure that the child complies, the adult has just reinforced the child's noncompliance. If the child's noncompliance worked once, they're likely to continue using it when given commands in the future. Instead, adults should issue the command, and if the child complies, immediately use labeled praise. If the child does not comply within a few seconds, the adult should restate the command followed by a warning for a consequence. Again, if the child complies, labeled praise should be used. However, if the child has not complied, the adult should immediately implement the consequence with no discussion (so the child isn't inadvertently given attention for noncompliance).

5. Use Tokens with Response Cost.

Token systems involve a child earning tokens, points, marbles, stickers, or any other physical objects that can later be traded in for desired rewards. Like labeled praise, the tokens should be given *immediately, frequently, and consistently* for the child's appropriate behaviors. For younger children, the act of earning the token might be enough! Additionally, younger children should be allowed to trade in their tokens frequently throughout the day in order to maintain their understanding of and motivation for the system. Older children can have smaller daily rewards and larger weekly rewards. Creating a menu of rewards allows the child to "cash in" for desired rewards. For misbehaviors, the same number of tokens the child would have earned for appropriate behaviors can be given back to you as a "cost" to the child. It's important that the child earns more tokens than he or she loses. Otherwise, the child will lose motivation for being part of this system. So, strategies #1 and #2 are very, very important and should be used very, very frequently.

6. Use Time Out and Other Consequences.

If used appropriately and, most importantly, in combination with praising and rewarding children for positive behaviors, negative consequences can be very effective. Parents often know their children very well and can identify their children's strongly non-preferred consequences such as removal of video games or cell phones, extra chores, going to bed early, etc. What helps to make this strategy effective is for the consequence to occur *immediately* after the child's misbehavior and to occur *consistently*, each time the child misbehaves. Additionally, a child should only be given one warning before the consequence occurs for noncompliance. If an adult often threatens without following through, the child will learn not to trust the adult, and the threat will become meaningless.