

GET OUT OF MY FACE



Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder know how to push your buttons, so don't let them, says **Fintan O'Regan...**

A pattern of behaviour where a child frequently loses his temper, defies adults and deliberately annoys others can be described as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).

In essence, children with ODD display a "counter-will" against authority, especially when frustrated or stressed. In these situations they are often completely inflexible and the more pressure you apply in an attempt to make them conform, the greater the opposition.

Lying becomes a way of life, and getting a reaction out of others becomes their chief hobby. Perhaps hardest of all to bear, they rarely show empathy and often believe nothing is their fault.



- Try to provide a “save face” option in front of peers by offering a choice of outcomes. Remove the audience factor; try and talk to the child quietly on a 1:1 basis where possible and remind her of past successes and capabilities.
- Try to find something positive to say first, for example: “Do you want to move closer to the board or remain where you are?” “Do you need me to help you or can you get on with things on your own?” “Is that what you want? What are you going to choose?”

It can sometimes be difficult to like children with ODD. The destructiveness and disagreeableness are purposeful. They like to see you get mad. Every request can end up as a power struggle. Lying becomes a way of life, and getting a reaction out of others becomes their chief hobby. Perhaps hardest of all to bear, they rarely show empathy and often believe nothing is their fault.

After a huge blow up, the child with ODD is often calm and collected. It is typically the teacher who looks as if they are going to lose it, which is understandable as they have been probably just been tricked, bullied, lied to or have witnessed temper tantrums that know no limits.

Children with ODD produce strong feelings in people. They spend their time trying to get a reaction, and they are often very successful in achieving this objective.

The key, therefore, is to stay the course. Take nothing personally, deny them the emotional reaction they expect to receive and deliver outcomes in a kindly but determined manner.



Getting it right

KEY STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CHILDREN WITH ODD...

- Be prepared to go into the “broken record” mode at times and don’t get drawn into smokescreen behaviour.
- Use humour if appropriate and try to find the positives in any situation.
- Give the child a responsibility.
- Isolate him to avoid peer reinforcement and embarrassment, and let him have his say.
- Give clear messages about negative behaviours and costs.
- Ask moral questions.
- Focus on moving forward but also dig for an apology.

These are often the children who will say “you can’t make me!”, “it’s not fair!” and “get out of my face or I will sue you!”. Gritting your teeth and holding back the urge to scream “I will see you in court!” are to be advised.

The reasons for and origins of ODD are difficult to detect, but a number of factors are thought to contribute to a child’s level of frustration and intolerance. These include unrecognised ADHD or Dyslexia, a lack of structure in early development, low self worth, or a combination of these things.

In his excellent book *The Defiant Child* (1999), Douglas Riley defines some of the behaviours exhibited by children with ODD. He points out that they:

- Live in fantasy land where they can defeat all authority figures
- Are optimistic and fail to learn from experience
- Seek revenge when angered
- Need to feel tough
- Feel you will run out of moves eventually
- Feel equal to their parents
- Emulate the behaviour of their least successful peers
- Answer most questions with “I don’t know”
- Employ logic that revolves around denial of responsibility
- Believe others must be fair to them, no matter how they behave

Children with ODD seek power and are extremely good at pushing emotional buttons. It’s therefore important that you remain calm and impassive. Do not send these children to the headteacher when they have transgressed. They like challenging authority. Instead, have them cool their heels in a time out area.

Don’t get into public arguments as children with ODD love to air their views in the public domain. Talk to them one-to-one instead. If the child says “This lesson is boring and I hate you” it is better to respond “Yes, you may think this lesson is boring, but please finish questions one to five before the break.”

Overall the key is to use assertive, as opposed to aggressive, language. The phrase “I need you to finish the assignment” is extremely powerful and effective compared to “will you” or “can you finish the assignment?”

Aggressive behaviour

Over 5% of children have ODD. At a young age it’s more common in boys than girls, but as they grow older the rate appears to be roughly equal in males and females.

It is exceptionally rare for a child just to have ODD as it is usually accompanied by ADHD or Conduct Disorder. However, it is worth making the point that ODD is characterised by aggressiveness and not impulsiveness. With ODD behaviour can often be premeditated, while with ADHD it usually occurs in the heat of the moment.

As a result, children with ODD are often much more difficult work with than children with ADHD. For example, a child with ADHD may impulsively push someone too hard on a swing and knock them down on the ground, but would likely be sorry for doing so afterwards. In contrast, a child with ODD might push another child out of the swing, say she didn’t do it and appear not to care.

If you’re teaching a child with ODD, try some of the following approaches:

- Keep reading the mood of the child.
- Always focus on the incident, not the child. Do not make it personal.

Find out more

If you’d like to benefit from Fin’s training and coaching services first hand, contact Fjmoregan@aol.com