

Growing Concerns
A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson
www.MomEnough.com

Question: I am exhausted by my daughter's resistance to everything I ask her to do. It seems that no matter what my demands, she defiantly refuses to cooperate. I end up pleading and nagging or even yelling, which gets us nowhere. How can I break this cycle?

Answer: Whether it's a toddler refusing to pick up her toys, a 10-year-old talking back, or a teenager resisting household chores, a child's defiance can make a parent's hair stand on end. It's easy to rise to the bait and turn even a minor challenge into a major power struggle, but that ends up being miserable for everyone. Instead there are steps you can take to defuse a conflict and help your child learn valuable lessons about respect and cooperation.

- The first step is to choose your battles carefully. Decide in advance which are the absolute rules or limits that you must enforce and which are negotiable. For example, with a teenager an absolute would be that there is no experimentation with alcohol or drugs. But keeping the bedroom neat might not be worth the battle. (Just close the door!)

Then, when you do make a request or set a limit and your daughter resists, try the following steps:

- Acknowledge your child's feelings. When kids grumble, they often just want to be heard. So simply say something like, "Yeah, I know doing dishes isn't the most fun thing to do. It will feel good when they're all done and you can go have some fun."
- Stand firm on your limit or demand – and do this every time the issue comes up. Once you've decided that this is an absolute, non-negotiable expectation, you can't afford to waver. Your daughter needs to see that you will not be worn down by whining or resistance.
- Within those absolute limits, offer choice as much as possible. For example, an absolute limit might be that homework will be done

every evening. But you might offer choices as to exactly when and where your daughter does the work.

- If defiance still continues, calmly state what the consequence will be if she doesn't comply within the next few minutes. (Without getting carried away by anger, make sure the consequence fits the crime.)
- Then, step back and allow your daughter time to comply. When kids are resistant, too often we parents move in closer and increase the volume and intensity of our demands. Then our child matches that intensity by increasing their resistance. By stepping back instead, we allow the child to save face and "choose" to cooperate.
- If that still doesn't work, impose the promised consequence swiftly and matter-of-factly. Shouting or bombarding the child with angry words does no good at this point. She needs to see that you meant what you said when you told her what the consequence her behavior would be. Period.
- Finally, once the consequence has been imposed, move on without bearing a grudge. Let the lesson of your clearly stated expectations and carefully chosen consequences speak for itself. And let your daughter see that she can start fresh the next time.

Know that all children are defiant at times. And at certain ages, especially during the toddler period and early adolescence, defiance is especially common as kids struggle to prove their independence. However, professional help is in order if defiance is very intense, lasts for many months, cuts across all situations, and interferes with a child's ability to have warm, supportive relationships with family, teachers or friends.

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