

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Summer 2019 • Richelle Votaw



Description

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is a disorder characterized by defiant and willfully disobedient behavior toward those in authority. Usually noticed before the age of eight, symptoms can include aggressiveness, irritability, argumentative behavior, and defiance to the extent that they cause significant behavior-related problems at home and school.

These may sound like normal behavior problems, but the primary difference in a moody child and a child with ODD is the prolonged nature of the behavior. In some cases of ODD the child may show the behaviors only in one location, such as only at home or only at school. In more severe cases the behavior is exhibited everywhere.

Characteristics

Children with ODD are quick to lose their temper and blame others for their own misbehavior. They do not take responsibility for their actions and will deliberately ignore rules, even though they are aware of them. While most children go through stages where they rebel against rules or throw tantrums, the child with ODD has an extremely high level of oppositional behavior. For example, children with ODD may immediately respond with “No!” before they even realize what is being asked of them. ODD is often diagnosed in conjunction with ADHD and may accompany depression, anxiety disorders, or learning disorders. Treatment may include medication, but more often, behavior interventions or behavior therapy are used, often with a parent.

Shannon’s Story

Shannon was an intelligent but headstrong little girl. When the teacher first started working with her, she had not yet been diagnosed, but a severe behavior problem was evident. While the rest of the class worked on activities, Shannon would refuse to participate, using a wide range of behaviors in attempts to take control of her situation. There were quiet tantrums (stomping off to a corner to curl up in a ball) and screaming tantrums. There were also times she ended up under a table, doing her own thing while making it clear she was not conforming to the class expectations.

Obviously, these situations disrupted the class, so the teacher sought ways to work with the girl. The teacher soon realized that by presenting Shannon with a choice of two activities, Shannon felt like she was in control. The teacher avoided questions where “no” was a possible answer. For example, instead of “Would you like to make a

card today?” the teacher might ask, “Do you want to make a card or go to the puzzle table?” This gave Shannon a way to control what she did while still doing the intended activity. The teacher never gave more than two choices.

Naturally, there were still times when Shannon’s behaviors reverted and she was defiant and argumentative, but this strategy enabled her to participate happily in class much more often than before. While there is no single solution, finding what works for your student will make everyone’s time in class more rewarding.

Accommodations and Supports

Post a schedule that the child can reference as needed so she always knows what to expect. For younger children, a picture schedule can help them understand the order of the classroom events and let them know when to expect transitions.

Prepare children for transitions in advance by stating what is happening next. For example, “In five minutes we will be having a snack.” For younger children, using a timer can be helpful if they do not yet comprehend the passage of time.

Provide a quiet place in the room where they can go when they feel they need some space. This should not be a place you send the child to (this is not time-out), but a place they go to step away and calm themselves, preventing a meltdown.

Structure the classroom activities so that any games with teams or group activities are randomly assigned. Do not let children choose their teammates or group members. Being left out or picked last can trigger a meltdown and create lasting negative feelings about the class.

Practical Tips

The best way to avoid power struggles is to use a variety of interventions to stop problems before they start.

Working with children with ODD can be challenging. It is easy to become frustrated, especially since the goal of the child is to resist control. The more controlling you are, the more defiant the child will become. It will take a tremendous amount of self-control on your part, but regardless of what the child does, remain calm, do not respond emotionally, and never confront the child in front of the other children. These behaviors can cause the problems to escalate.

If the child becomes defiant, choose your words carefully and make sure you stick to what you say rather than making empty threats. For example, telling a child, “If you don’t finish your puzzle then you can’t play the game,” and then including him in the game anyway, will cause the child to no longer take you seriously. Don’t threaten a punishment unless you intend to follow through on it, no matter how mild.

If you have a child with ODD that attends regularly, it may be helpful to set up a reward system for the child to work toward. Allow the child to select the reward or privilege she wishes to earn. Make sure the child is aware of expectations and provide a system for her to track her progress. Younger children may enjoy putting stickers on a chart, whereas older children may prefer to tally points.

When children do respond appropriately, it is important to give them specific praise to reinforce the behavior. For example, “Wonderful job putting all of your materials away.” This specific praise (compared to a generic “good job”) will help remind them of the behavior you are looking for and encourage them to do it again.

Resources

A Teacher’s Guide to Understanding the Disruptive Behavior Disorders: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Conduct Disorder by Pearnell Bell.

The Defiant Child: A Parent’s Guide to Oppositional Defiant Disorder by Douglas A. Riley.

“Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Recommendations for Teachers and for Parents” from the University of Delaware College of Education and Human Development, <https://www.education.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/ODD-011807.pdf>

“Oppositional Defiant Disorder Resource Center” by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, http://www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Oppositional_Defiant_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

“Oppositional Defiant Disorder” from the Ontario Teachers’ Federation, <https://www.teachspiced.ca/oppositional-defiant-disorder>

Connect with ABLE

If you have questions regarding special needs, contact ABLE (Accepting, Believing, Loving, Embracing). ABLE Ministry is a program of the Ladies Ministries Division of the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and is dedicated to assisting the special needs and disabled populations within the church and the community. ABLE is committed to increasing awareness about disabilities in the community, the church, and the world. They strive to provide the strength, support, and assistance necessary to meet the needs of those affected by disabilities—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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