

Ten Tips to Help Children with “Oppositional Defiant Disorder”

Maureen Healy

1. **Listen** – The number one situation I see is that children diagnosed with ODD feel grossly misunderstood and once they’re better understood their need for defiance goes way down. Said differently, if you as the parent or teacher can learn what they’re so angry by – or triggered by, then you can help them move in a more positive direction by emotionally connecting with them (empathy) and redirecting them. Without this step there is little hope for ODD progress.
2. **Partner with your child** – Everything about teaching and parenting is about partnering with children these days. Gone are the days where authoritative approaches were rewarded or frankly worked. Today, we need to work together and problem solve. I’m not saying that you let your son or daughter run the house because there are things that are non-negotiable (for example, showering or bathing, doing homework, changing underwear) but how things get done usually has a great deal of flexibility. For example, do you want to do your homework now, in 2 hours or before you leave in the morning for school. Those are your options.
3. **Praise Small Steps of Cooperation** – Every step forward needs praise even if it feels ridiculous especially if we’re doing our best to change

behavior or automatic responses. For example, say your son, Marcus, gets into the minivan and for the first time doesn't say, "I don't want to go there" but instead cooperates --- boom, thank him and recognize his ability to go with the flow.

4. **Focus on Problem Solving** – Children with ODD get angry easily and their default position is "No, I will not do my homework" or "No, I'm not going to that Birthday Party!" So regardless of the situation it's usually helpful in inviting your son or daughter to help solve the problem. For example, with the homework, you might ask: "What would you need to complete your homework? Or is there another creative way we can do it?" Billy, age ten, hated writing book reports so his dad, Fred, bought him an audio software program that helped him complete the assignment in a way that worked for him.
5. **Remember:** The kids that are the hardest to love are the ones who need it the most. This doesn't need much explanation, but it's a motto of mine.
6. **Find what motivates them, and use it to inspire them.** Every being on the planet is motivated either internally, externally or a combination of both. Boys and girls with a diagnosis of ODD are often not externally motivated by punishments or to cooperate, so it takes some sleuthing to discover what really is driving them --- but when you do, you can help motivate and inspire them to cooperate because you've find their driving force. For example, Mattie loves money, which sounds silly at age 8, but he does. If you pay him to do something whether it's take the trash out or make breakfast for his siblings he does it happily even for a few quarters. The goal is to be creative, if possible. (I know it's ridiculous to think it's always possible!)
7. **Get a child a mentor** – Parents are in the hardest role of caring for their children, keeping them safe, and doing their best to have fun with them despite the challenges of everyday living. One of the reasons I started my mentoring program for highly sensitive children is because having an outside person guide your child on the how of positive emotional health, and teach them tools to help them move them in a positive direction is very effective. Oftentimes it doesn't take much for a child to start making positive shifts, but it is speeded up by a mentor, in my experience.
8. **Get someone to translate your child's language or behavior.** Find someone who is "cut from the same cloth" as your child but has learned how to make their ODD tendencies a strength versus a liability. This is why I mentor highly sensitive children, because I was one.

9. **Teach why teamwork matters** – Many children don't inherently value working together. It's almost like they don't trust others or see the point. Helping children realize that we can do more as a team than alone is a valuable part of the "cure" of ODD. For example, think Sheldon Cooper from the popular television series, *The Big Bang Theory*. It's easy to think of this mathematical genius as not only defiant but uncooperative. Actually, I've seen research that many children with ODD are gifted and I bet their oppositional nature was given to them as a gift, but helping them make it so is our work.
10. **Remember** – you're probably parenting a leader so it's an extra credit assignment from God. The question is: How do you lead a leader? This is the billion dollar question without one singular answer, but helping your child gain a good character, decision-making abilities as well as bolstering their social and emotional health is going to put them on the right path. And don't forget you don't need to do it alone – build a team around them whether it's a therapist or mentor like me, someone in your community or someone in your school guiding your child. The success of your child doesn't just rest on you – it rests on all of us.

About the Author

Maureen Healy is an award-winning author, popular speaker and leader in the field of children's emotional health. Her mentoring program for highly sensitive children has helped parents and their children worldwide. Learn more: www.growinghappykids.com