

CHAPTER 2

Why Is This Happening to My Family?

When a child's defiance begins to terrorize your household, it's very tempting to look for someone to blame. Throwing up your hands and proclaiming, "Jimmy is just a monster," or "I guess I'm just a terrible parent," may even offer a little relief from the anxiety of asking yourself, "Why?" But as you probably know, it's a fleeting comfort, because what you really need is answers that you can use to make things better. What you really want is some assurance that your child isn't a hopeless case and you're not a total failure.

You'll find both well-researched answers and plenty of reassurance in this chapter. The most important fundamental facts that we have about defiant behavior are that (1) it takes time to develop and (2) it arises from a complicated set of causes. So don't be too hard on yourself if you haven't been able to figure out how you and your child got where you are today. In the following pages, I break down what we know into manageable segments that will help you take a clearer look at what's been happening at home. As you read, please remember that there's only one purpose for the clarity of hindsight I hope you'll gain in this chapter: to illuminate the future.

Behavior Never Occurs in a Vacuum

Ten-year-old Cindy and her mother had spent the last hour happily working together on a trail map they were supposed to take to Cindy's Girl Scout

meeting that evening. When Mom handed Cindy a marker to use for the lake-side trail, just as she had been doing for the other trails drawn, Cindy suddenly pushed the pen back at her mother and shouted, "No! You do it!" Mom looked up at Cindy in surprise and said, "Why? We agreed you would do all the drawing." Cindy's voice got even louder: "I said no!" She then stood up, glared at her mother, slapped her hard on the arm, and stomped out of the room.

The Simmons family was in the middle of a typical dinner. Eight-year-old Sam, famished after an afternoon of soccer practice, was happily wolfing down his chicken, slowing down only when his mother quietly reminded him that the food wasn't going anywhere. Twelve-year-old Tina was telling her parents about that day's science test in between bites. Ten-year-old Brian, noisily rocking back and forth in his chair, roughly pushed his food around on his plate until most of it ended up on his lap or the floor. Each time he bent to retrieve it, he took the opportunity to jab his brother in the side with his elbow. Despite Sam's increasingly annoyed protests, Mom and Dad studiously ignored Brian's antics.

It was 8:30, nine-year-old Tim's weeknight bedtime, and the battle had begun. As usual, Tim's mother firmly told him to turn off the TV and brush his teeth. Also as usual, Tim ignored her. She raised her voice; he didn't budge. She marched over to the TV and turned it off; he turned it back on. And so it went, Tim's mother planting herself between her son and the TV, bodily lifting him to his feet and pointing him toward the bathroom, the verbal battle escalating with each passing minute until finally, at 9:30, Tim fell tearfully into bed and his mother fell dejectedly into an armchair.

No wonder you're ready to throw up your hands. When children behave this way, it's hard to see any rhyme or reason in their actions. Why would Cindy suddenly refuse to cooperate with her mother, despite apparently having enjoyed the project to that point? Why does Brian behave so differently from his siblings, despite all three having apparently reasonable parents? Why does Tim pull the same antbed-time tricks every night when he has plenty of proof that bedtime is inevitable?

When children behave in ways that run counter to our expectations, we are baffled. But the fact that any individual incident is be-

yond our immediate understanding doesn't mean that the child is behaving at random. In any given situation, how your child behaves (how *any* child behaves) is a function of many factors, among them the child's innate personality and temperament, the child's learning history within the family, and the immediate consequences at hand. How these factors shake out in a particular situation may never be entirely predictable, but having some idea of what is involved in your child's behavior will at least release you from the paralysis of total confusion.

As her mother will tell you, Cindy has always had a hard time controlling her impulses. When she starts to get bored with a project, she wants it to end . . . *now*. Where other kids might stick it out, Cindy strikes out. She's learned over the years that pleading and arguing don't always get her what she wants but hitting nearly always makes people back down.

Brian acts differently from his siblings because he *is* different. He can't sit still long enough to listen to the soft voice of reason that works with Sam and Tina, and ignoring him doesn't discourage his misbehavior because he's not doing it for attention—he's doing it because he has no strong incentive to stop. Even more motivating, however, is that he gets out of a meal he doesn't like and a chance to return to his beloved Sega games.

As for Tim, sure he knows that bedtime is inevitable. He just doesn't care. Because he has a hard time looking ahead, his only goal is to put off what he finds unappealing right now. Any postponement of the inevitable is a victory to him.

All of this is easy for me to say—I've been observing these children for quite some time from the safe emotional distance that a parent rarely has. If you could see your child the way I've been able to see Cindy, Brian, and Tim, you too would recognize various forces at work in the child's behavior:

1. There's the child's temperament and other characteristics.

Cindy is extremely bright but also irritable and hot-tempered. Brian is highly active and tends to hold grudges against those who annoy him (especially his little brother, who earlier that day had broken Brian's favorite car). Tim is generally cheerful but resists any change that isn't his own idea and doesn't seem to be able to look beyond this moment in time.

2. Then there's the history of your interactions with your child.

Over time children gather a wealth of information in their mental archives: how far they can push you, what gets a reaction and what does not, what they get for being "good" as well as what they get for being "bad," and much, much more. And it is especially what they get out of, escape from, or avoid doing when they act this way that is so critical to understanding their behavior. A major goal of growing children is to make their world sensible and predictable. You, as a parent, are a huge part of that world, and how you talk to and treat your child teaches him how to behave with you as surely as Pavlov taught his dog. A couple of times Cindy's mother was so distressed by her daughter's physical aggression that she gave her what she wanted, and that was enough to convince Cindy that hitting was the way to go. Brian has learned that he can torture his brother relentlessly because his parents believe that if they keep ignoring it, he'll outgrow it. Tim knows that if he keeps fighting her, he'll be able to avoid whatever his mother wants him to do for quite a while.

3. Then there's your personality. Cindy's mother is very reasonable and logical; she's totally thrown by Cindy's outbursts of temper. Brian's parents both have a low threshold for excitement; their middle child's "personality" distresses them so severely that they've begun to retreat from him altogether. Tim and his mother are like two peas in a pod—both prickly and demanding, both rigid and immature for their age.

4. Finally, there are all the other bits of your family's environment. Events, relationships, and situations inside and outside the home can affect a child's behavior. Both Cindy and her mother are hurting over a bitter divorce and custody battle. Brian's father has severe asthma, which makes both parents very anxious. Tim's mother is struggling to make ends meet, exhausted by the demands of working during the day and going to school in the evening.

Take another look at your situation: How would you describe your child's temperament? Can you step back and see what motivates her in various circumstances? Can you identify a pattern in the way the two of you act when you ask your child to do something or stop doing something—or when your child asks you for something? How would you describe yourself? Are you generally as cool as a cucumber

or as hot as a chili pepper? Do you have the patience of a saint or the world's shortest fuse? Are you and your child very different or very similar? What about the rest of your life—tranquil or crazed, manageable or loaded with stress? It's difficult to see ourselves and our loved ones with crystal clarity, so a little farther on I provide some tools to help you explore these factors one at a time. One of the reasons we all have trouble sorting out the many factors involved in behavior is that they're intertwined in complex ways.

Every Action Has an Equal— and Opposite!—Reaction

Not only does each of these factors shape your child's behavior, but each affects all the others—and back again. Your child's irritability affects your mood, and your bad mood makes the child more defensive and defiant. Your poor health makes you testy, which encourages your child to oppose you, which puts more stress on you and worsens your health. You can watch this merry-go-round spinning within individual confrontations and also over long stretches of time. Let's say Tim's mother, exhausted by the stress of being her family's sole support, has no energy to control her angry responses to her ever-demanding child. Tim's "difficult personality" eventually becomes diagnosable ODD. With additional stress and less rest, Tim's mother ends up suffering from chronic headaches. After missing too many days of work due to pain, she loses her job and is now in dire financial straits. This stress worsens the interactions between Mom and Tim, and Tim begins to have run-ins with the law. Now that Mom has to add lawyers' bills to an ever-growing pile of commitments she can't meet, you can imagine where the mother-son relationship is headed.

What Do You Think Causes Your Child's Defiance?

Many of the families I counsel have the deck stacked against them: A child who is temperamental and impulsive, with a high activity level and a short attention span, is being reared by parents who have a lot of

the same characteristics, as well as marital, financial, and other forms of stress, and who are unsure of how to act in encounters with their defiant child. Once they realize how complex the causes of defiance can be, they're a lot less quick to look for a convenient scapegoat to explain the problem. With temperament a fixed element and many life stresses out of one's control as well, defiance can't really be called anyone's fault, can it?

What about you? What do *you* think causes your child to be defiant? Answer the following questions. If you live together, have the child's other parent answer them separately.

1. Imagine a typical confrontation with your child. What makes the child refuse to comply with your wishes in individual cases like those? What seems to motivate the child? What does the child expect to get out of acting this way?

2. Now list the influences you believe might be at work—the child's makeup, your (and your spouse's) temperament, your (and your spouse's) approach to dealing with the child, and events and circumstances affecting the family.

3. How long has the child's behavior toward you (and possibly others) been defiant, noncompliant, or oppositional? When did it first become a problem?

Between you and your child's other parent, you may very well see a glimmering of a problem in each of the four factors that contribute to defiance. Even if you're luckier in life than most of my patients, you'll want to explore the causes further. Remember that over time, little problems can add up to a pretty sizable problem of defiant behavior. But once you know what is at work, you can try to change the factors you have power over and try to work around those you don't.

The Child: Biology, Environment, or a Little of Each?

When I ask parents what they think causes their child's defiance, I get a pretty broad range of answers. Generally, though, the answers break down into "nature versus nurture" explanations: Either the child was

destined to be this way by biology or something in the child's environment is to blame. In 40 to 60% or more of all cases, defiant children have some inborn characteristic that makes them prone to oppositional behavior. But as you'll see, trying to isolate biology from environment is a lot like trying to get a better look at the design in a rich tapestry by pulling the threads apart. You want to understand which of your child's characteristics might contribute to defiance—not to attach some label to the child but to understand better what makes the child tick: What motivates her? How does he think? What will he feel like in different situations? What bothers her most? What are her strengths?

Temperament or "Personality"

Some children simply seem to be troubled and troublesome from birth, starting life with poor eating and sleeping habits, a tendency to be overactive and oversensitive, and a leaning toward irritability, moodiness, and fussiness. As many parents attest, these signs of "difficult" temperament are easily recognizable as early as a baby's first six months. Did your child cry when overstimulated as an infant? Did a slight change in routine throw her off and make her moody for days, even weeks? Was he "colicky"? What about now? Is the child overly fastidious, rigid, moody, easily angered, or flighty?

Like behavior, your child's temperament can be seen as falling somewhere along a continuum. To find your child's niche on that line, rate the different problem traits you see in your child on a severity scale of 1 to 10 (1 = no problem or a very rare problem, 5 = a moderate problem or one that occurs often, 10 = a serious problem or one that almost always occurs).

PROFILE OF YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

Problems with impulse control:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Does the child shout out whatever he feels like saying, whether it's in the backyard or in a theater? Does she grab what she wants wherever she is, perhaps hitting other children when they get in her way? Does he have great difficulty taking turns or waiting in line?

Problems with attention span:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Does the child spend less time than you'd expect watching, listening to, playing with, and otherwise reacting to what is going on around him or her? Is he easily distracted, unable to stick with things as long as others?

Problems with activity level:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Does the child fidget, flail about, run around, or otherwise move in ways that seem excessive or inappropriate for his or her age?

Social behavior problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Are possessions more important to the child than people? Does your son or daughter generally fail to make eye contact with others and to initiate play or conversation? Does the child show little concern for the effect he or she has on others?

Emotional problems and irritability:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Is your child skittish and oversensitive, withdrawing at the slightest noise or touch or at the sight of sudden movement or other visual stimulation? Does stimulation by people or things make the child cranky or tearful? Is the child regularly theatrical, impossible to console?

Problems with sleeping or eating:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Is your child a picky eater? As a baby, did the child develop colic easily? Does the child sleep irregularly? Did he or she sleep for only short periods as a baby?

Toilet training problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Was/is the child resistant to toilet training? Does the child have bedwetting or other elimination problems now?

A total score of 25 or higher indicates a significant problem with temperament. If your child's overall score on this scale is around this mark, it doesn't take much imagination to see that problems between the child and others are likely. Only a saint could fail to be aggravated by, say, a boy who does what he feels like when he feels like it, regardless of the setting or others' feelings; who may run around in a frenzy but overreact to the slightest bump or fright; who could at any meal refuse to eat at all and who believes that 1:00 A.M. is a perfectly suitable bedtime for a six-year-old. If you're this child's primary caregiver, you have a formidable job: You have to make a lot of requests of the child throughout the day, you're going to get a lot of *nos* in reply, and by bedtime you'll probably be very frustrated with each other.

Some of you may have circled all 8's, 9's, or 10's. If you're not just having a particularly bad day and feeling inclined to exaggerate, you may want to explore whether your child has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by using the form on page 33. If you suspect ADHD is possible, you'll probably want to get a professional evaluation (see Chapter 3). If the preceding list doesn't even address most of the quirks you see in your child's personality, you may also want to seek professional help to rule out inherited predispositions toward other psychological or psychiatric disorders. First, though, fill out the Profile of Your Characteristics questionnaire on page 35, it may show that you're overreacting a bit.

Later chapters will go into more detail on how temperament shows up in behavior. For now, be aware that these traits will affect not only how your child acts but also how he or she thinks and feels. A child who has impulse control problems may seem selfish, bossy, and rude but really just doesn't stop to think about the consequences of what he or she desires right now. A child who has problems with attention span will want a lot more excitement and stimulation than the average child, and one with a high activity level will feel severely constrained by sitting still and being quiet. One who doesn't socialize as peers do won't be swayed by standard rules of conduct and won't appear to care much about how his or her actions affect others. An irritable or emotional child will get annoyed at the slightest obstacle, may treat a slight as if it's the end of the world, and may approach life with a glum attitude that seems unchildlike. What drives many defiant children I have known is the overriding desire to get what they want right

here, right now. As you saw with Tim earlier in the chapter, many parents are puzzled by the fact that children know bedtime, mealtime, or homework is inevitable yet fight it day after day. Defiant children often don't look forward or backward in time the way others do. It doesn't matter that bedtime is inescapable; what matters is escaping it *in this particular moment*.

Body, Mind, and Maturity

Being "high-strung," "prickly," "difficult," or "demanding" can make your child defiant, disobedient, and downright rude in any and all individual situations. Unfortunately, other characteristics of your child can also lead, though a little more circuitously, to defiant behavior. Does your child have any intellectual or developmental delays? Is he or she suffering from health or chronic medical problems? Are there any physical disabilities? It's a sad fact that children are often mean, even cruel, when they first meet someone who is different in any way.

If your child is called names or mocked because he can't play the same games as others, has a speech impairment, or has a tendency to step on others' toes (literally and figuratively), it shouldn't be a surprise if the boy becomes prickly, defensive, or even hostile. On top of the negative reactions the child may get from peers is the disadvantage the child may be at if a disability makes him less able to understand adults' requests or how to comply with them and less able to control himself.

How about your child? Does your son or daughter have any such hurdles to overcome? List them and rate their severity below.

Health problems: _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Physical problems: _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Developmental delays: _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

COULD YOUR CHILD HAVE ADHD?

Over the last six months, which of the following behaviors has your child shown *often* compared to others of your child's age?

1. Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork.
2. Has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities.
3. Does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish work.
5. Has difficulty organizing tasks and activities.
6. Avoids tasks (e.g., schoolwork, homework) that require mental effort.
7. Loses things necessary for tasks or activities.
8. Is easily distracted.
9. Is forgetful in daily activities.
10. Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat.
11. Leaves seat in classroom or in other situations in which remaining seated is expected.
12. Runs about or climbs excessively in situations in which it is inappropriate.
13. Has difficulty playing or engaging in leisure activities quietly.
14. Is "on the go" or acts as if "driven by a motor."
15. Talks excessively.
16. Blurts out answers before questions have been completed.
17. Has difficulty awaiting turn.
18. Interrupts or intrudes on others.

If your child has six or more of the behaviors in 1-9 and/or six or more in 10-18, he or she may have ADHD and should probably be evaluated professionally (see Chapter 3). Save your answers for later comparison.

The Parents: The Old Block That Produced the Chip?

Dan's innocent question, "How was your day?" prompted this anguished reply from his wife, Sandy: "It was *awful*. Ben can't sit still long enough to do one homework assignment, let alone three. If he doesn't get the answers right away, he blames it on me and starts throwing his pencils around. He questions every little suggestion I make, like some sort of miniature devil's advocate. Then when he's finally finished, instead of taking pride in his accomplishment, he informs me that since it's my fault he has used up his outdoor time on homework, he won't have time to help with the dishes tonight." Exhausted from his own day, Dan could only snap, "Of course he acts like that—he's just like you."

The fact that this was probably the worst thing Dan could have said doesn't make it any less true. Sandy and Ben are very much alike in temperament, though they're at loggerheads so often that both would deny any similarity between them. Similar temperament is just one way that your own characteristics can contribute to defiance in your child. (And, by the way, notice that this chip-off-the-old-block likeness is, in turn, having a negative effect on Sandy and Dan's marital relationship, which, as we'll see, can boomerang back into exacerbating Ben's defiance.)

Like Mother, Like Son

If your child inherited a testy temperament or any of the other characteristics we just discussed, where do you think he got them? Chances are your child got them from you or your spouse. Let's assume, as is so often the case in my clinical experience, that you are the mother and primary caregiver and your son is the defiant child. If you do resemble each other, then your short fuse certainly could evoke defiant reactions in your short-fused son. Or your impulsiveness may lead you to speak or act with your child before you think, meaning your dealings with him could be impetuous, capricious, and inconsistent. Unpredictability has long been known to cause all young creatures—human and animal—lots of anxiety, which often brings out defiant reactions. Your similarities in temperament can take many other shapes, and the

more severe your own problems, the more likely it is that they'll contribute to defiance in your child.

"Is That My Child?"

The reverse is also possible, of course—that you and your child are so different that you feel at a loss in managing the child. Where you're calm and deliberate, your child is excitable and impulsive. No matter how open-minded we are, we all have expectations for how people should think and act, especially our children. Behavior and attitudes that are extremely foreign are often intolerable to us, and we may overreact.

The Goodness of Fit

What this all adds up to is a quality you may have heard about elsewhere. It's called the "goodness of fit," and it means simply that you need to be aware of how your temperament dovetails with or diverges from your child's so you know where areas of conflict are likely to arise. On the following form, rate any problems of your own that you believe may contribute to difficulties you have in managing your child on the same scale as you used for your child earlier. If you're willing to risk making uncomfortable discoveries, consider having your spouse or another close relative fill out the form about you as well.

PROFILE OF YOUR CHARACTERISTICS

Health problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Physical problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Emotional problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Thinking problems:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with attention span:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with activity level:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with impulse control:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with moodiness:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with eating:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Problems with sleeping:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

"High" scores on any of these can make child rearing difficult, but it's even more revealing to compare these scores to the ones you got from your child's profile. Pay particular attention to problems you've identified in yourself with impulse control, attention span, and activity level. Many adults are now discovering, with the help of therapists, that they have ADHD. This condition is not only highly inheritable, which means your children may have it too, but it poses additional challenges to parenting. It's very difficult to be attentive and consistent with your children when you suffer from the problems associated with ADHD. You may want to get help for yourself before or while you try the strategies for helping your child in Part Two of this book.

The Parent-Child Relationship: Great Expectations

The way your dealings with your child tend to unfold is very much a product of the child's characteristics and yours, as I illustrate throughout this section. What you've learned about the two of you so far has

probably already made certain typical clashes more understandable. If your child is highly active and oversensitive to touch, it's no wonder the three-year-old hates being bathed. If you have a volatile temper, is it any surprise that her resistance at bathtime sorely tempts you to spank her? This not-so-good fit can make any individual encounter a nasty confrontation, but does it have to sever the parent-child bond? Does it have to transform your child into someone who resists *everything* you request and spends her days fighting a series of hopeless battles?

No, it does not. Parent-child interactions cause defiance to grow only when they repeatedly follow the same negative pattern, teaching destructive lessons to both child and parent. In other words, it takes time. Here's how it goes:

1. By paying the wrong kind of attention, you unintentionally encourage your child's oppositional behavior. It's hard not to let your buttons get pushed when your child has a temper tantrum or aggressively disobeys. But although simply ignoring the problem doesn't work for most defiant children, neither does paying attention if your child's goal was in fact to interrupt what you were doing, get your undivided attention, or otherwise gain your notice. The trick, unfortunately, is to know what the child is looking for—and understanding that depends to an extent on knowing the child's temperament. Some children will act out to get your attention; others will act out because it puts off something unpleasant or gratifies some other strong desire, and ignoring them will be interpreted as tacit approval of their behavior. If you give the child what he or she wants or allow the child to evade what he or she doesn't want, you can expect a repeat of the defiant behavior in the future.

2. By taking an inconsistent approach to your child, you urge the child to seek predictability, even if that means behaving badly to get your negative reaction. When the rules change every day, it's only natural for a child to take a constant tack of testing parental authority through defiance. So, even though it may seem bizarre to you, if your son feels that he can elicit a predictably angry reaction from you by refusing to obey, he's quite likely to defy you on a regular basis.

How many of us can say we've never been guilty of occasionally

rewarding the very same bad behavior that we usually punish? Imagine you're in a grocery store and little Suzy begs for a candy bar. Ordinarily you calmly and firmly say no, and if she throws a temper tantrum you quietly usher her out of the store and give her a time-out at home. When you follow this pattern consistently, Suzy learns that temper tantrums do not get her a candy bar. But if Suzy is already a "high-strung, demanding" child, and every once in a while you reply to her histrionics with "All right, all right, let's just not make a scene today," Suzy learns that *sometimes* a temper tantrum does get her a candy bar. With most children, that "sometimes" is plenty to encourage them to try the tantrum every time—just as gamblers are encouraged to slap their money down again and again by the periodic payoffs they get.

3. By showing that you have a breaking point, you ask for bad behavior to get worse. In situations like the candy bar scenario, the child learns not only that sometimes a temper tantrum works but also that a temper tantrum worked where wheedling did not. So the next time the child wants a candy bar she skips the "Please, please, please" approach altogether and goes straight to the tantrum. Ironically, this learning process works on parents as well. Over time both parents and child figure out that the more quickly they get enraged and threatening, the more quickly they get what they want—the parents get obedience or the child gets a reprieve from a command. When this process goes unchecked over many months, it can lead to confrontations that end in parents physically abusing their children or the children destroying property, attacking the parents, or even hurting themselves. This is how "No!" escalates into violence in some families.

As with everything we've discussed so far about cause, you can see that these three mechanisms often overlap and intertwine. Yielding to a tantrum but not to begging is a form of inconsistency in response. So is rewarding the negative with something positive. According to your child's mental records, your behavior simply doesn't add up. No surprise, then, that the child seems to react irrationally.

Now that you understand some of the mechanisms that encourage children to defy their parents, take a look at the interactions you have with your son or daughter.

What Happens When You Make a Request of Your Child?

Andy, age nine, and Tyrell, age eight, are a lot alike. Both are argumentative, rigid, and quick-tempered.

When Kay asks Andy to take out the garbage, his regular Tuesday-evening chore, he starts to grumble and whine. As his mother notices he's building himself up to a full outburst, she matter-of-factly gets up, turns off the Nintendo game, and explains that he'll be able to get back to it in 15 minutes as she gently leads him into the kitchen. As Andy collects the garbage, Kay smiles and thanks him, and when he finishes she kisses him on the cheek and tells him what a big help he is. He bounds down the hall to return to his game.

When Celia asks Tyrell to turn off the TV and come set the table for dinner, he answers, "Just a minute, Mom—the show's almost over." Without leaving the kitchen, Celia repeats her request three times, a little louder each time. Tyrell continues to ignore her. As her voice rises, he turns up the volume. Finally, Celia marches into the family room and says, "Young man, if you don't get into that kitchen and set the table this minute, there won't be any TV for you after dinner—or tomorrow!" Tyrell shouts back, "That's not fair," stands up, and starts kicking the base of the couch. "Stop that!" his mother scolds. "You're getting mud all over my new sofa!" "I don't care!" Tyrell shouts back. "You're not fair!" "Tyrell, get into that kitchen right now and set that table, or you're going to be in big trouble when your father gets home!" Tyrell turns back to the TV in time to see the credits rolling. "Now look what you've done! You made me miss it!" he yells, then he picks up the remote control and throws it at the wall, where it shatters. As he runs out of the room in a rage, Celia takes a deep breath and walks into the kitchen, where she starts to gather plates and silverware for the table.

What just happened in these two scenes is important to understanding defiance, but not as important as what happens the next time these requests come up. Andy realizes taking the garbage out doesn't take long and wins him points with Mom, so he does it without complaint. Tyrell skips all the arguments and goes right to breaking a candy dish the next time his mother asks him to set the table.

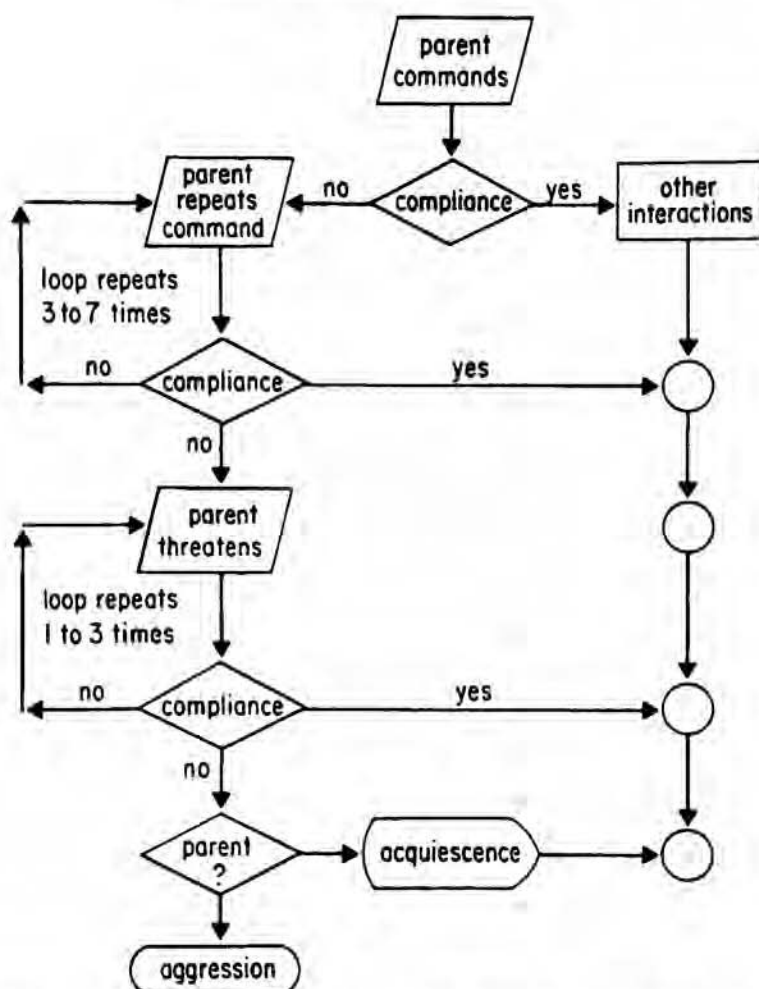
In each case, both mother and son learned something from the ex-

change, which they then applied to the next such situation. Andy learned that his mother wouldn't let him stall and that he got her approval for doing his chore. Kay learned that calm action and sincere appreciation got the results that she wanted from her son. If you talk to a psychologist, you may hear this type of learning called *positive reinforcement*. Tyrell learned that he could easily put his mother off and that if he wanted to get out of setting the table altogether a little violence would do the trick. Psychologists call that *negative reinforcement*. Here's how it might act on Celia: Tired of Tyrell's new destructive bent, Celia decides to "give him some of his own medicine." After he breaks her crystal candy dish one day, she runs to his room and breaks his beloved remote-control car. Tyrell ends up setting the table, and Celia concludes that requests and threats don't work—it's best to retaliate if she wants Tyrell to do anything.

In real life it's not so easy to recognize these mistakes or the lessons learned from such encounters, because the escalation of defiance—remember that slow but devastating glacier?—is so gradual. But look back and you're bound to recognize that confrontations with your child didn't explode into warfare as quickly in the past as they do today. Cause and effect can also be difficult to see when they're happening because they don't occur in an unbroken straight line. Tyrell doesn't have to get out of setting the table every day for him to keep trying extreme measures to evade the chore. Even occasional success, as with the gambler described earlier, reinforces the worthiness of his defiant strategy. If you could step back and review the pattern of your interactions with your defiant child over time, you would probably see that they often follow the sequence shown in the figure on page 41.

How Do You Get Your Child to Obey Your "No"?

Children will grab onto other slipups of yours as well. Let's say you have a three-year-old who's pulling groceries off the shelves as you walk down the aisles. Repeated orders to stop it have resulted in a little girl who is now throwing a full-blown tantrum in the frozen-food section, with a dozen pairs of haughty eyes surreptitiously looking down their noses at you, the incompetent parent. So you do the only



Typical sequence of interactions between parents and defiant children when a command is given. From *Hyperactive Children: A Handbook for Diagnosis and Treatment* by R. A. Barkley (New York: Guilford Press, p. 100). Copyright 1981 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

thing you can think of: You pick the child up, walk over to the ice cream cabinet, grab an ice cream bar, and shove it into your child's grubby little hand with an "Mmm, this ice cream looks good, doesn't it, honey? Why don't you eat it right now?" Guess what's in store for you on future trips to the grocery store?

What Happens When the Child Wants Something from You?

Inconsistency also works against parent and child when it's the child who wants something. Say it's a school night, and your daughter wants to stay up an hour past her bedtime to watch a special Halloween TV program. You start out saying no, but she whines until she wears you down and you give in. A week later, she asks for a similar break, and you're surprised and annoyed when she keeps at you for a full 20 minutes and then refuses to kiss you good night when you won't give in. Why were you surprised? The week before, she successfully used negative behavior to get what psychologists call a *positive consequence*, and you can be sure she'll try it again—and again and again!

How Do You Reward Good Behavior?

Then there's your reaction to positive behavior from the child. Let's say that, for whatever reason, Tyrell obediently rises from his post in front of the TV the first time his mother asks him to set the table. As he walks by her on his way into the kitchen, she sarcastically remarks, "Well, *well*, since when did *you* decide to behave so nicely?" Tyrell gets no thanks, no approval, nothing positive from this encounter. How likely is it that he'll behave this way again? Or let's imagine that Celia is so stunned by Tyrell's obedience that she ignores it, afraid if she says a thing she'll "jinx" him and he'll start to act out again. Some parents find that if they make a big deal over noticing good behavior, their child seems so enamored of their attention that he'll do anything to keep it—including reverting to bad behavior—so they just leave it alone. Here, too, Tyrell gets no reinforcement for his good behavior and is unlikely to adopt it as a regular *modus operandi*.

Ignoring can, in fact, become an unfortunate way of life for parents of defiant children. They're afraid to acknowledge good behavior, and they've run out of resources to use with bad behavior, so they just start putting distance between themselves and their child's actions. The child, of course, usually takes ignoring as unspoken permission to continue oppositional behavior, and the defiance just gets worse. Because spending time with the child becomes less and less fun, the par-

ents actually begin to avoid potentially rewarding shared activities. This is how the bond between parent and child begins to unravel. It is also how older children begin to develop serious forms of conduct disorder, involving covert criminal activity such as theft and vandalism, as well as overt acts such as physical aggression.

The parents' actions and reactions depicted in the preceding examples would not necessarily create a defiant child. We all make mistakes with our children—every day, in fact—and they don't have to be irrevocable. But combine a pattern of these mistakes with a child who has a difficult temperament and a parent whose fit with the child is awkward, and you have all the ingredients for a child with ODD. Now let's throw one more ingredient into the mix: the additional ongoing stresses that many families face.

The Child's Environment: How's the Rest of Your Life?

Other elements in your family's environment—the full catastrophe of life—can contribute to defiant behavior in your child as well. These elements include personal problems of the parents or other family members, health problems, financial trouble, marital relationships, employment problems, and relationships with relatives, friends, and other children in the family. Stress in any of these areas can adversely affect the parents in ways that contribute to defiance, they can affect the child directly, and they can have a reciprocal effect. Here are examples:

- **Marital relationships.** Research has shown that single mothers, especially those who are socially isolated, are most likely to have aggressive children. Single parents are often exhausted from carrying the extra burden of child rearing. They may also feel guilty about their separation or divorce and therefore are not as consistent as they should be in enforcing discipline with their kids. Single mothers also tend not to project quite the same authoritative image to their sons as fathers, and consequently the mothers may be tested more by their

sons when no man lives in the home. Marital discord is another common problem. As I explained earlier, the parent—often the mother—who has primary care responsibility for the child naturally has to make the greater number of requests of the child and thus is in the greater position to evoke defiance. A smart child can pull parents' strings by setting them against each other, creating marital strife via defiance. Or, because of the difference in the amount of time spent with the child, the parents may simply disagree on the severity of the child's problem and the way to handle it. In addition, existing marital discord can put stress on the parents, making it more likely that they will be irritable toward a defiant child and treat the child with inconsistency, indiscriminacy, and inattention—which in turn will likely increase the defiant behavior, which could in its turn worsen the marital conflict.

- **Personal and health problems.** Stan keeps better control over his diabetes at some times than at others. When his blood sugar vacillates widely, so does his mood, and consequently his patience with his son Roy, who has been diagnosed as having ADHD and ODD. When Roy acts up, Stan drinks too much, which only makes his diabetes worse. And so the cycle continues.

- **Financial and occupational problems.** Maria is so worried about her family's financial future that she's taken a second job. That means 11-year-old Pilar is on her own until late in the evening, and her mother is exhausted and irritable when she is home. She snaps at her daughter, and her daughter snaps back. Pilar doesn't know how to handle the pressure of not being able to dress as nicely as the other girls at school, and lately she's started to complain of headaches, which only seem to make her temper shorter.

- **Relationships with others.** Gerry feels so alone. Despite having two brothers and two sisters in the area, all with families of their own, she has little companionship because get-togethers involving her daughter Lily are so trying for everyone. Her older daughter Julia resents the changes in her mother and her family life that Lily seems to have caused and spends as much time as possible at friends' houses. The 12-year-old's grades are plummeting, and in Gerry's last knock-down-drag-out with Lily the girl rendered her mother speechless by yelling, "You don't care what happens to me, and Julia already hates me!"

One more way that stresses inside and outside the family can affect defiance is that these stresses can simply cause parents to overreact to garden-variety childhood misbehavior. This may lead simply to parents consulting a professional and being reassured that nothing is wrong. But it could also lead parents to treat the child as if he or she is "sick" or "bad," which could lower the child's self-esteem and cause the child to misbehave defensively—meaning the parents' diagnosis becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

You may not be molding a monster from an innocent child, and you may not be in a position to change your lot in life. Still, if you're unaware of which parts of the child's environment are contributing to defiant behavior, you don't stand a chance of resolving the problems. Fill out the following form to identify the stressful factors in your child's life.

PROFILE OF FAMILY PROBLEMS

Describe problems that you perceive in each of the following areas, including how you believe they affect your child's behavior and your behavior toward your child.

1. Family health problems: _____

2. Marital problems: _____

3. Financial problems: _____

4. Behavior problems with other children in the family: _____

5. Occupational/employment problems: _____

6. Problems with relatives/in-laws: _____

7. Problems with friends: _____

8. Other sources of stress (religion, conflict over recreational activities for the family, drug or alcohol abuse, etc.): _____

I hope by now you have a better understanding of what causes defiance in children and what may be causing your own child to behave that way. Sometimes the simple exercise of breaking down a complex situation into simpler parts and separately recording your observations about each helps you put together a more sensible whole. It's kind of like finding all the corners in a jigsaw puzzle and then grouping the pieces by color before trying to fit them all together.

I hope, too, that you now understand that much of the conflict between you and your child comes from characteristics that each of you will naturally find irritating to the other. Your child's temperament is not his fault any more than you're to blame for having a temperament of your own. Your goal in identifying as many potential causes of defiant behavior as you can is to recognize where conflict may be in-

evitable so that you can prepare to minimize it. It is also to change those contributing factors that you do in fact have power over—of which there are many. The next chapter will set you on the road to doing something about the problem with your new understanding of its cause.

RECAP: THE CAUSES

Although other problems or disorders—such as developmental delays and ADHD—may contribute to defiant behavior, in general four factors are involved in cause: (1) the child's temperament and other characteristics, (2) the type of interplay that has typically taken place between parent and child, (3) the parents' personality, and (4) the stresses of the family environment. Each factor affects the others, and in fact it is quite typical for the child's and parents' behavior to affect each other reciprocally, escalating individual conflicts and worsening the child's defiance and your relationship with your child over time.

Questionnaires in this chapter should help you identify major similarities and differences between you and your child—both of which can trigger painful clashes—to give you a handle on what makes each of you tick and how good the fit tends to be. If you haven't done so before, taking a good look at the family problems and other stressors in your child's life will flesh out your understanding of why your child may behave the way he or she does. Perhaps most important, though, because this is where you can exercise much control, is to become aware of how you may unintentionally encourage defiance by the way you interact with your child.