Addressing Persistent Defiance

Any student may refuse to cooperate at times, but handling students with oppositional defiant disorder requires that teachers have a plan.

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We all have students who test our limits. Most kids can be uncooperative at times, especially if they’re tired, hungry, or feeling overwhelmed. For certain age groups, like 2- to 3-year-olds and teenagers, noncooperative behavior is a normal part of development.

In addition, [up to 16 percent of all children and 40 percent of students](https://www.additudemag.com/what-is-oppositional-defiant-disorder/) diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder have [oppositional defiant disorder](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-With-Oppositional-Defiant-Disorder-072.aspx) (ODD), which is characterized by a pattern, in multiple settings over time, of consistent negative and hostile behavior that can include deliberately annoying or upsetting others, explosions of anger and hostility, defiance or frequent arguing with adults, and then blaming others for misbehavior.

Often teachers react defensively to obstinate behavior, creating a situation where teacher and student may become locked in a power struggle or an ineffective pattern of communication.

So how does a teacher handle a student who openly defies rules, purposely tries to irritate the teacher, or has a pattern of hostile behavior toward authority? Here are some suggestions to help you avoid problems or to manage them when they arise.

**REMAIN CALM**

As a new teacher, I quickly determined that showing anger was counterproductive with students who were oppositional. It made the behavior worse as they were often amused or encouraged by upsetting an adult.

Even when you’re upset or frustrated, it’s important not to allow the child to see your emotional response. Keep a positive tone to your voice, and adopt neutral body language by keeping your hands by your sides. Be cautious about approaching the student or entering their personal space as this might escalate the situation.

**CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY**

Learning to use “I statements” helped me immensely in working with students with difficult behavior. When a student is noncompliant, often our first impulse as teachers is to point out the behavior by using a statement that begins with “You” and gives a command. For example, “You never listen and follow directions. Don’t get out of your seat again!”

Rephrasing this as an “I statement” is much more effective. For example, “I would like for all of my students to sit down, listen, and follow directions so that they know what to do next.”

This statement is less judgmental, and it instructs by describing the positive behavior desired. Remember to keep directions concise and deliver them in multiple ways (in writing, spoken aloud, or using signals, for example).

When possible, offer choices where you will be happy with either outcome. For example, “Students may sit on the beanbags or at their desks to work quietly.” Choices make students feel like they have agency without having to display defiant behavior.

**REINFORCE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR**

Switch your focus from recognizing negative behavior to seeking out demonstrations of positive behavior. Look for and reward even small steps toward flexibility, compliance, and cooperation.

When a student shows improvement, give it attention. I found positive notes home to be especially effective. I sent postcards to my students who demonstrated improvement in their behavior. A parent once told me that not only was this the first positive note the student had received, but he was so proud of it that he kept it on the refrigerator to look at every day. Don’t underestimate the power of positive words in shaping behavior.

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**DETERMINE THE CAUSE OF THE BEHAVIOR**

Behaviors help students obtain something desirable or escape something undesirable. Learning to think of behavior as feedback or a form of communication helped me to work more effectively as a teacher with students who display problem behaviors.

Ask yourself:

* When does this behavior happen or not happen?
* What happens before and after the behavior?
* Who is the audience?
* Are there factors outside of the student’s control that might be causing or contributing to the behaviors? (For example, has the student experienced trauma? Does he or she come from a household with housing or food instability?)
* What alternative behavior would be more acceptable than the one being displayed?

Consider that there may be understandable reasons for the misbehavior. For example, as a teacher I often saw students create a problem to avoid doing work that was too difficult for them. Some students act out because of difficult issues in their homes or communities. I also saw students act tough or argumentative to impress peers or avoid bullying or victimization by other students.

Understanding the cause of the behavior will help in establishing a plan to address the challenges.

If a student frequently displays problematic behavior, it also may be possible to request a functional behavior assessment (FBA), which looks at academic and non-academic factors that could be contributing to or triggering behavior. While [the law only requires an FBA after a suspension of 10 days or more](https://www.pbis.org/evaluation/evaluation-briefs/when-to-use-fba), an FBA may be requested at any time. An FBA is usually conducted by a team, which can include a special education teacher, general education teachers, parent or guardian, school administrators, and specialists (such as a speech therapist, psychologist, or behavior specialist). The FBA is then used to create a detailed behavior intervention plan (BIP).

**MAKE A PLAN**

Once a behavior is identified and assessed, a plan may be developed to prevent it from continuing. A BIP outlines steps a teacher will take when a problem behavior occurs.

A BIP should teach the student more productive behaviors and strategies, reward positive and appropriate behaviors, and outline who is responsible for each intervention.

Perhaps changes can be made in the environment, like moving the student’s seat, or instructional methodology changes could be made, like shortening or modifying an assignment to match the student’s capability for independent work. Teachers could also consider altering routines if there are times when the behavior is likely to occur.

For example, if a student is having an outburst every time they’re called on in class or asked to present information in front of their peers, the plan might offer alternatives such as:

* The teacher will provide the student with a set of questions about the lesson to answer on paper and turn in instead of answering questions aloud.
* The student will be responsible for asking for a short break or alternative location to complete assignments when they are feeling overwhelmed.
* Each day, if the student turns in their answers after the lesson, they will receive a positive note home and 5–10 minutes to work on their art projects.

The behavior plan that the team comes up with should be implemented in all classes. The team should meet to hear teacher and parent/guardian feedback, and the plan should be revisited periodically to change ineffective interventions or modify interventions where the student shows improvement.

We all have the capacity to learn, change, and grow. When given the right tools and environment, students with problematic behavior can learn more productive strategies that will help them have positive and effective interactions with others.