

Defiance: Why it happens and what to do about it

Approved by the [ParentCenter Medical Advisory Board](#)

By Karen Miles

Why preschoolers defy their parents

Your preschooler refuses to come to dinner when you call him, ignores your request to pick up his socks, and pushes his trucks down the stairs despite your repeated instructions not to. Why is he being so defiant?

Believe it or not, if your preschooler is like most, he's much less selfish than he was at 2. He's also less dependent on you, a sign that his sense of identity is stronger and more secure. But that doesn't mean he's overcome his rebellious streak. In fact, "Defiance is how a preschooler asserts himself," says Susanne Ayers Denham, a professor of psychology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. So when yours refuses to cooperate, he's basically saying, "I don't like your rules."

What you can do about defiance

Be understanding. If you ask your preschooler to come in for lunch and he yells, "Not now!" then cries when you make him come in anyway, try to put yourself in his shoes. If he's busy playing on the swings, give him a hug and tell him you know it's tough to leave, but lunch is ready. The idea is to show him that instead of being part of the problem, you're actually on his side. Try not to get angry (even if the neighbors are checking out the show your child's putting on). Be kind but firm about making him come in when he must.

Set limits. Preschoolers need — and even want — limits, so set them and make sure your child knows what they are. Spell it out for him: "We don't hit each other," or "You must stay in bed after I tuck you in." If your youngster has problems abiding by the rules (as every preschooler does), work on solutions. If he hits his little sister because he's feeling left out at home, for instance, let him help you feed or bathe the baby, and find a way for him to have his own special time with you. If he gets out of bed because he's afraid of the dark, give him a flashlight to keep on his nightstand.

Reinforce good behavior. Rather than paying attention to your preschooler only when he's misbehaving, try to catch him being good. When Suzi Prokell, of Richardson, Texas, spots her 4-year-old, Jacob, being nice to his little brother, Ryan, for instance, she goes out of her way to encourage him.

And though you may be sorely tempted to give your child a verbal lashing when he engages in less-desirable antics, hold your tongue. "When a child behaves badly, he already feels terrible," says Jane Nelsen, author of *Positive Time-Out and 50 Other Ways to Avoid Power Struggles in Homes and Classrooms*. "Where did we ever get the idea that in order to make children do better, we first have to make them feel worse?" In fact,

doing so may only produce more negative behavior.

Remember, too, that disciplining your preschooler doesn't mean controlling him — it means teaching him to control *himself*. Punishment might incite him to behave, but only because he's afraid not to. It's best for your child to do the right thing because he *wants* to — because it makes the day more fun for him or makes him feel good.

Use time-out — positively. When your preschooler's at the end of his rope, ready to bust a gasket because he isn't getting his way, help him cool off. Rather than a punitive time-out ("Go to your room!"), take him to a comfy sofa in the den or to a favorite corner of his bedroom. Maybe he'd even like to design a "time-out place" himself — with a big pillow, a soft blanket, and a few favorite books. If he refuses to go to his time-out spot, offer to go with him and read a story. If he still refuses, go yourself just to chill out. You'll not only set a good example, you might get the break you need. Once you both feel better, that's the time to talk to him about appropriate behavior.

Empower your preschooler. Providing opportunities for your youngster to make his own choices allows him to strut some of his newfound autonomy in a controlled environment. Instead of demanding that he put on the jeans you've selected, for instance, let him choose between two pairs you've laid out. Ask if he'd like peas or green beans with dinner, and a story or a song at bedtime.

Another way to help your youngster feel more in control is to tell him what he *can* do instead of what he can't. Rather than saying, "No! Don't swing the bat in the house!" say, "Let's go outside and practice batting." If he wants an ice-cream cone before dinner, tell him he can have a slice of cheese — or let him choose between cheese and an apple.

Choose your battles. If your fashion-savvy preschooler wants to wear his green sweatshirt with his orange shorts, what do you care? If he wants waffles for lunch and peanut butter and jelly for breakfast, what's the harm? Sometimes it's easier to just look the other way — when he splashes in the mud puddle on the way home, for example, or stuffs his puppet under his bed instead of putting it on the proper shelf.

Distract and divert. Avoid situations that might spark your preschooler's defiant streak. Why risk taking him to your sister's newly carpeted, lavishly decorated apartment when you can just meet her for a picnic in the park? How realistic is it to expect him to behave in a fancy restaurant or during an hour-long community meeting? If you happen to find yourself in a tricky situation, though, use distraction to avoid a head-on collision with your child. If you're walking through the mall and spy a toy store that tends to send your kid into a conniption fit, for instance, quickly steer him in a different direction or divert his attention toward the water fountain ("Wow, Jason, look at that fountain! Want to throw in a penny and make a wish?").

Respect his age and stage. When you ask your preschooler to make his bed or sweep the porch, make sure he knows *how*. Take time to teach him new tasks, and do them together until he really gets the hang of it. Sometimes what looks like defiance is simply the

inability to follow through on a responsibility that's too difficult for him.

Finally, respect the unique world your preschooler lives in, especially the way he perceives time (or doesn't). Rather than expecting him to jump up from a game at preschool to get in the car, give him a few minutes' notice to help him switch gears. ("Aaron, we're leaving in five minutes, so please finish up.") There's no guarantee that he'll break away from his fun without complaint — in fact, he'll probably grouse all the way home. But as long as you're patient and consistent, your youngster will eventually learn that defiance isn't the way to get what he wants.

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