



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 5 DELIBERATE DISOBEDIENCE

Dear Parent,

Only fairy tale families can be described as living happily ever after. A mix of expectations, disappointments, personality flaws, human nature, stresses, and insecurities are common to human beings. These forces often erupt into quarreling, fighting, yelling, demanding, withdrawing or defiant behavior. A previous Parent Partnership newsletter addressed the issue of angry behavior, its reasons, its goals, and effective ways that parents can eliminate angry behavior or, at least, redirect or diffuse it. This newsletter focuses on anger that evolves into deliberate disobedience and destructive behaviors i.e., causing material damage to an object, sabotaging the project of another person, bullying peers, taunting another child, setting fires, systematically ignoring or isolating another person, hitting, screaming ugly words, pushing a child in the way of danger, or verbalizing insults. This newsletter offers information to support parent efforts to understand the dynamics behind hurtful behavior and to learn how to deal with it in productive ways.

Obedience is a word of Latin origin that means *to listen to another*. In the ideal, obedience has three attributes: (1) the ability to listen, (2) to understand what is said or intended, and (3) to put into action the message heard. Obedient behavior heals, supports, is inclusive, and improves life. Deliberate disobedience, on the other hand, occurs when a person understands what is good and yet intentionally refuses to act on it; choosing instead behavior that ignores and opposes the good. Attitudes or choices that separate, destroy, wound, deceive, divide, exclude, manipulate, or tear down are destructive because they alienate a person from himself, from his God, or from others. Destructive behavior, whether emotional, psychological, or physical, leaves each person involved feeling fearful, disappointed and discouraged.

Why would a child intentionally choose behavior that results in sorrow? When a child of average moral development acts out behavior that is deliberately disobedient or destructive, it is usually a reaction to personal feelings of (1) powerlessness, (2) injustice, or (3) inadequacy. When legitimate needs for control and personal power, significance, respect and accomplishment are fed, destructive acting out becomes unnecessary. An increase of *autonomy* creates a balance between independence and control; exercises of *initiative* create a sense of respect and fairness; and *industry* creates a sense of competence, capability and responsibility.

Autonomy

Power-seeking children are trying to show that they are in control of the situation. When parents enforce their own will, the child devises new ways to control. The parent wins a particular battle but will lose the war because the parent reaction actually reinforces the misbehavior. Rather than fight with a child or give in to his demands, parents are advised to withdraw from the conflict and act calmly and firmly without speaking. At neutral times autonomy is fostered by creating opportunities for the child to be independent, to make decisions, and to be sought as an authority on particular issues or areas of responsibility.

Initiative

If revenge is the goal of the disobedience or behavior the child will be cruel. She is energized by mutual antagonism, by hurting others, and by being

labeled as the worst child. She perceives that she has been treated unfairly, disrespectfully, or irreverently and concludes that she has the right to get even and to hurt others in return for the hurt she bears. Though tempted, refuse to retaliate or get even with her. Withdraw from the revenge cycle. Communicate with authentic statements of encouragement. Correct her behavior while showing respect and compassion. At neutral times initiative is fostered by consistent experiences of fairness, consideration, reasonableness, recognition and appreciation. Work to build a relationship of trust and acceptance.

Industry

All people need to feel relied upon and significant. A child who feels incompetent appears disabled. Others do not expect him to be capable, productive, or cooperative. He is deeply discouraged and views himself as unable and helpless. Feeling

overwhelmed and paralyzed to combat the situation, parents tend to be passive and unresponsive. To foster industry, avoid all criticism. Encourage and reinforce any effort he makes, no matter how small. Identify, develop and focus on his strengths and assets. Arrange for small successes. Avoid pity and despair. Train him in skills and accomplishments.

Consistent exercise of self-reliance, self-starting, and follow-through eliminates the reason behind despairing and destructive choices because it meets the basic needs of all human beings. The intentional use of

expectations and encouragement fosters a positive self-concept while serving as an effective form of indirect control. By encouraging a child's interest in music, sports, hobbies, theater, clubs, academic accomplishment, or entrepreneurial pursuits, a parent exercises indirect control that shepherds a child in positive directions. Children who are actively engaged in accomplishment need little external control just as children who experience successful relationships are less likely to choose destructive behaviors.

PROACTIVE PARENTING

Parents like yourself were asked how they respond to deliberate disobedience or destructive behavior. They offered the following advice to aid the process of socialization and to eliminate continued disobedience or hurtful conduct. May their suggestions affirm your parenting style and support your efforts in child-rearing.

- Give him positive feedback for getting along well with others, i.e., praise him for playing cooperatively, doing something thoughtful for someone, being concerned about another's feelings, etc.
- Do not force her into uncomfortable positions, i.e., do not make her approach a group of strange children; insist that she make-up with someone with whom she is still angry; or force her to play with someone she does not like or whom she feels does not like her.
- Avoid comparisons, e.g., "Why can't you be like your cousin Richard?" "Pat is much kinder to her little brother than you are to yours." "Your sister never gave me the kind of trouble you do."
- Allow him to work out his own relationships with a minimum of interference from you.
- Do not express lack confidence in her.
- Make corrections in private. Do not apologize for her behavior, criticize her to another, or allow someone to criticize her to you.
- If she gets hysterical, physically restrain her and tell her that you love her. When she calms down discuss what was going on with her at the time and what she could do if ever there is a next time.
- Remove him from the situation. Say, "You may return when you are ready to discuss the situation".
- Make sure she knows why she is being disciplined. Have her verbalize how she disobeyed and why it was wrong.
- Always follow up discipline with affection and reaffirmation of love. Make sure that consequences fit the crime. Never withdraw love.
- Take time to make him understand how the other person feels.
- If a problem is ongoing, look at the situation, place, and people to discover the common denominator. Limit opportunities to be in the situation until the child is capable of dealing with it.
- Hurtful behavior is a more severe transgression than disobedience. Generally, if a child hurts another, she needs to do something special for that person, make restitution or retribution.
- When a child does something wrong, he has to tell his other parent about what he did and why.
- Fine him in five minute increments to do chores beyond his regular chores, i.e., load and unload the dishwasher, hang the laundry, wash cars.
- Be very explicit of what is acceptable and the consequences. Be sure to follow through with consequences and be consistent. Parents stand together as a unified front.
- Require apologies. The child must recognize what the offense was, explain why it was unacceptable, and make restitution.
- Let family members express how hurtful and deliberately mean behavior affects them. These confrontations end in dialogue and negotiation.
- Look hard for an underlying cause of the behavior. Ask what she thinks is a fair way to handle the situation. Talk about the why of the disobedience.
- Good, clear rules applied fairly are strong fences that protect against harm.
- If he purposely breaks or destroys something, he needs to replace the item or its monetary value. He may have to earn the money by working it off with extra household chores.
- Guilt is a feeling of responsibility for a real or imagined offense. It indicates that a child knows the difference between right and wrong. Teach constructive guilt which says, "I will use my disappointment as a stepping stone for improvement". Do not use destructive guilt which says, "I am a bad person and I am incapable of correcting the wrong that I have done".

Many books provide parent strategies for raising confident and caring children. One easy-to-read source that takes into consideration the concerns of single, married, and remarried parents is *Raising a Responsible Child* by Dinkmeyer and McKay. Within it you will find additional insights for handling the typical challenges that arise in our complex family lives.

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