

You Can't Change Your Defiant Teenager...

...but you can change how you parent! The broken rules and rude remarks are snowballing. After years of opposition and defiance, your teen is beginning to resemble the enemy. And that's not healthy. It's also not hopeless. Here, learn how to craft a parenting style that breaks your teen's defiant habits and encourages positive cooperation moving forward.



Why Won't My Teen Listen?

Teen defiance is a shape shifter. Sometimes, it's sarcastic backtalk or a covert broken rule. Other times, it escalates to screaming matches, slammed doors, and desperate tears — both yours and your child's.

Some level of teen defiance is developmentally normal, and should be expected. That's doubly true for teens with attention deficit disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)), who may be more biologically prone to oppositional characteristics. But when your teen's negative behavior starts to control your life, it's time to change your parenting approach and tackle defiance in loving, productive ways. Learn how to begin with this advice from Arthur Robin, Ph.D., as discussed in the Attention Talk Radio episode "[Defiant ADHD Teens](#)" moderated by Jeff Copper of [DIG Coaching](#).

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What Is Defiance vs. Normal Teen Behavior?

Defiant behavior typically peaks during two major childhood turning points: around age 2 — during the Terrible Twos of testing boundaries and refusing parents — and around age 12 — during the onslaught of puberty and the sometimes painful transition from childhood to adulthood. These bursts of bad behavior are anguishing for parents, but they're also usually quite temporary. That is normal. What is not normal: Negative, [oppositional behavior](#) that lasts for 6 months or more, progresses to violence, or starts to disrupt your family's day-to-day functioning. This warrants a new

parenting approach.

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Where Does My Teen's Oppositional Behavior Come From?

[ADHD is rooted in the brain](#), in your teen's genetic wiring. So are other conditions like OCD, mood disorders, or anxiety. Oppositional behavior is (to some extent) rooted in the brain as well, but it differs from other conditions in that it *relies on two parties*.

In other words, your teen can't exhibit defiance in a vacuum. He needs you (or a teacher, coach, or another authority figure) to disobey or disrespect or defy. A child with ADHD still has ADHD symptoms when there's no one else around; a

defiant child only exhibits symptoms through interactions with others. That's why some experts actually prefer using the terms "oppositional families" or "defiant family interactions," to highlight the fact that your child isn't acting alone.

[\[Self-Test: Does Your Child Have Oppositional Defiant Disorder?\]](#)

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The Four Factors of Defiant Behavior

Russell Barkley, Ph.D., has created a "four-factor model" to explain the origins of defiant behavior, from your child's genetic makeup to your own disciplinary strategies. The four factors are:

1. The **child's characteristics** (including genes, temperament, and personality traits)
2. The **parent or parents' characteristics** (including genes, temperament, and personality traits)
3. The **environment** in which the family lives (including socioeconomic factors, culture, community support, etc.)
4. **Parenting practices**

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How Does ADHD Play a Role in Behavior?

Children and teens with ADHD are more likely to display oppositional behavior than are those without the condition. The reasons for this are complex, but a major component is

hyperactivity — either physical or mental. A child who acts on impulse, or whose brain is whirring a million miles a minute, is significantly more likely to be told “No” or “Stop” or “Don’t touch that” over and over by authority figures in his or her life. This constant pushback and redirection sets the stage for defiant interchanges to occur.

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How Do Parents Play a Role in Behavior?

It’s true that hyperactive, impulsive kids are more likely to behave defiantly. But a parent’s temperament plays a role, too — particularly if the parent has ADHD. A strong-willed child being raised by an equally strong-willed parent — or a parent who’s prone to losing her temper — is more likely to fall prey to defiant interactions. A laid-back parent, on the

other hand, provides little for the child to push back against, resulting in significantly less outright defiance. Of course, parents who don't care or don't pay adequate attention to their children set them up for other risks.

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What Can Parents Do to Take Charge of Defiant Behavior?

The bottom line? You can't change your teen's temperament — or even your own. If your teen is hyperactive, she'll likely remain so for the rest of her life; if you've always been strong-willed, you're not suddenly going to become the paragon of chill parenting.

The third factor in defiant behavior — environment — is

slightly more changeable, but it often requires money or resources that families simply can't access. What is under your control, however — and highly malleable — are your parenting practices. If you change your parenting practices so that you're engaging with your teen in a more positive, affirming way, you will get back a more positive response — including, in the long run, a less [disrespectful teenager](#), and less defiant behavior.

[\[Don't Freak Out! And 13 More Rules for Navigating Teen Behavior Challenges\]](#)

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3 Defining Factors of Better Parenting

When building new parenting practices that work for teens

with ADHD, parents should keep in mind three major ideas:

1. **Consistency:** Teens need to know what's expected of them, and they need to believe that parents will follow through consistently on the consequences they've established for missing those expectations. If you say to your child, "Turn off that video game," and he ignores you, your response should be the same every time. If one day you throw up your hands and let him continue playing, but another day you storm over and unplug the game from the wall, your teen won't have a clear understanding of his limits — and he will be more likely to react negatively or with further defiance.
2. **Structure:** Teens (especially those with ADHD) thrive with structure, but they also crave independence. At this stage, parents must strike a healthy balance between offering support and slowly encouraging your teen to take on appropriate responsibilities and advocate for herself. Don't be a dictator; be a guide, ready to offer additional help whenever your teen asks for it.
3. **Love:** Parenting a defiant teenager is difficult, but it's critical that parents don't resort to hostile, cold, or withholding behavior. Your teen loves you, despite his challenges; it's important to show him kindness, warmth, and love in return, even when you're frustrated or angry.

4 Steps to Better Teen Behavior

The principles of consistency, structure, and love should guide your interactions with your teen. But what should those interactions actually look like? In [*Your Defiant Teen*\(#CommissionsEarned\)](#), authors Barkley and Robin outline these beginner strategies for frazzled parents:

1. **One-on-one time:** Taking 15 to 20 minutes, 4 to 5 times a week, to get some face time with your teen (ideally doing something he enjoys) will help you break the “logjam of negativity” that stems from years of defiant behavior.
2. **Communicate better:** Parents must learn how to give commands appropriately, when (and how) to deliver

praise, and how to differentiate the behaviors that deserve a response from those that don't. (For more information on better communication with your teen, check out [THIS ARTICLE](#).)

3. **Use incentives to modify behavior:** Like all humans, teens with ADHD respond to tangible rewards. Figure out what rewards inspire your teen's best behavior, and set up a system for encouraging good behavior. (For more on picking the right rewards for teens and tweens, check out [THIS ARTICLE](#).)
4. **Solve problems together:** What your teen wants, more than anything, is to be treated like an adult. Show him you respect him by asking for his input on problems, brainstorming solutions together, and implementing his ideas whenever possible. You'll be surprised at what you and your teen can come up with when you work together.

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Teen Defiance Is Not Hopeless

Raising an oppositional teen can be overwhelming — and many parents start to worry that nothing will ever change. In fact, real, lasting change is possible — if it starts with you. You may find that you need outside help, and that's okay. But making a conscious decision to raise your teen in a productive, positive way is the first step toward a better relationship with your child.

[\[Back From the Brink: Two Families' Stories of Oppositional Defiant Disorder\]](#)

This content was originally broadcast on [Attention Talk Radio](#) and moderated by Attention and ADHD Coach Jeff Copper

of [DIG Coaching](#), which offers coaching services in person and remotely.

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