

Question: My child is argumentative and refuses to do what I ask. Are there some tips for parenting my defiant child?

Answer: When telling the child to do something, first make sure that you mean it. If you are not planning to follow-up with consequences if it is not done, the child will learn that it is okay to disregard commands. It is important that you do not present the command as a question or favor (“Will you pick up your toys?”). Commands should be stated simply, directly, and in an authoritative voice. In order to keep the commands simple and understandable, parents should not give too many commands at one time. If the task is complicated, break it down one step at a time. It is essential that when you are giving commands your child is paying attention. Make sure that you have reduced distractions (television, video games, etc.) and that you are making eye contact with your child. After you have told your child what to do and you are not sure if he/she was paying attention or understood, it is helpful to ask the child to repeat the command.

When the child does not comply and you are following through with time out, should take the child immediately to the time out chair despite any apologies or promises that the child makes. Place the child in the chair and set a timer for the amount of time he/she will stay. The time spent should be about 1-2 minutes for each year of the child’s age (6 years old = 6 minutes). Once the child has served the desired amount of time in the chair, he/she must agree to do what he/she was told to do. Repeat this process until the child completes the task.

Parenting defiant children involves more than giving clear commands and following through, however. An essential part of parenting is dedicating a significant portion of time to your child. This commitment can often be difficult, especially if there are other young children in the home. Having “special time” with your child will help you to pay attention to your child’s desirable behavior and praise him or her for it. It is ideal to set aside about 20 minutes of “special time” each day.

When beginning this process, parents may feel frustrated or think that “it doesn’t work!” Remember that these steps involve a commitment from all adults in the home. If misbehavior is rewarded by one parent but punished by another, the child is not properly learning desired behaviors. Parenting this way also requires consistency. If the child is punished sometimes and rewarded sometimes for the same behavior the child can become confused about what is expected. Do not become discouraged if, after a week, you do not see a change in your child’s behavior. Working through this model may take weeks or months of consistent parenting. Incorporating these parenting skills will not only encourage desired behavior in your child but also build stronger family relationships.