

TIP SHEET: ODD Intervention

Children given the diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) have an ongoing pattern of uncooperative, defiant, and hostile behavior toward authority figures that seriously interferes with the day to day functioning. These children are a real challenge! You have to look at these children with “different eyes”. Looking for the motivations and unconscious intentions of the child is the best way to reach this child. Symptoms of ODD may include:

- Frequent temper tantrums
- Excessive arguing with adults
- Often questioning rules
- Active defiance and refusal to comply with adult requests and rules
- Deliberate attempts to annoy or upset people
- Blaming others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior
- Often being touchy or easily annoyed by others
- Frequent anger and resentment
- Mean and hateful talking when upset
- Spiteful attitude and revenge seeking

Here are some ways you help the child with ODD:

- Always build on the positives, give the child praise and positive reinforcement when he shows flexibility or cooperation.
- Take a time-out or break if you are about to make the conflict with your child worse, not better. This is good modeling for your child. Support your child if he decides to take a time-out to prevent overreacting.
- Pick your battles. Since the child with ODD has trouble avoiding power struggles, prioritize the things you want your child to do. If you give the child a time-out in his room for misbehavior, don't keep adding time for arguing. Say: “your time will start when you go to your room.”
- Set up reasonable, age appropriate limits with consequences that can be enforced consistently.
- Manage your own stress. Use respite care and other breaks as needed

The oppositional child has learned to manipulate people to obtain what they need desire. This may or may not be a conscious or premeditated decision on the part of the child. “Blaming” the child for their behavior is a common mistake. The child is simply responding to their environment in a way that has worked for them in the past. Instead of getting caught in the “blame trap” explore the child's motivations and the underlying/unconscious beliefs that control the oppositional behavior.

Interventions:

- **Emotion labeling** can be a helpful in deescalating confrontations because it helps the child to acknowledge his or her current feeling rather than continuing to communicate it indirectly through acting-out behavior. A foster parent who sees a child slamming their back pack down, mumbling under their breath as they get home from school might say to the child, “You seem angry. Tell me about your day at school” Once the emotion is labeled, the foster parent and child can then talk about it, figure out what may have triggered it, and together find solutions. Emotion labeling should generally be done tentatively, in a way that is both asking and telling. (“Hector, you sound nervous...”, “Asia, you seem frustrated...”), this sets up a win-win situation. No one is a mind reader, so you can't know *completely* what the child is experiencing. Asking in this “not quite sure” invites the child to correct your assumption if it's

off the mark; communication happens and we have a “win”. If on the other hand you get it right; communication still happens, the child experiences your having empathy with them and you gain valuable insight while possibly avoiding a blowup later driven by unexpressed emotional distress.

- **Spontaneous Rewards** means that rewards are given for no reason at all. The child doesn't have to do anything to get them, they just happen for no reason. Spontaneously take your child to a park, movie, zoo, or for a walk. Walk in the door after work with a small toy, comic book, or some candy.
- **Tell them they're you care about them.** Several times a day say something that says to the child I care about you! You don't have to say “I love you” some children might be suspicious of that statement especially if they've recently arrived in your home. That's okay; the idea is to let your child know “you are loved”. These children often feel they're not loved because of their behavior. Your job is to radiate love.
- **Build their self-esteem.** Self-esteem and self-confidence are important factors in the development of and response to oppositional behavior. A confident child is less likely to feel threatened and become angry during conflict. Find something in every interaction the child is doing right. This builds self-esteem in the child and makes her more willing to work on achievement of goals.
- **Spend time with your child.** Learn how to play video games; give cooking lessons; ride bikes; go for walks; go bird watching or stargazing; do a puzzle; make a model; fly a kite; shoot hoops; look at clouds. Do something that *they* want to do.
- **Talk with the child, but mostly listen.** Listen and take what they have to say seriously. Spend time listening to them about their day and withhold any negative or critical comments.
- **Don't sweat the small stuff.** Kids are people too. Children will make mistakes or act in ways that you dislike. Pick your battles. Ask yourself whether or not intervention is warranted.
- **Don't expect miracles.** Odds are things *will* get worse before they get better. The oppositional child has well learned and established ways of interacting with the world and change will not happen quickly or easily. The child will attempt to hang on (like a pit-bull with a pork chop) to their previously successful behavior. The child will likely become increasingly frustrated when you change the effectiveness of their oppositional attempts. Be patient and persistent and celebrate the little victories.