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Understanding the Defiant Child

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Directives: Children

What are directives? Directives are expectations that you have of your child and that you express to your child. Giving your child a directive is a way of letting him or her know what she or he is expected to do. Directives are different from threats. Threats are "scare tactics" or consequences used to scare or intimidate the child about what will happen if he or she does not comply. Directives are simply telling your child what is expected of him or her. There are several important points to learn about directives:

1. **Make sure you mean it.** Never give a command that you do not intend to see the child complete. When you make a request of your child, plan to back it up with appropriate consequences, both positive and negative, to show that you mean what you have said.
2. **Do not present the directive as a question or favor.** State the command or directive in a simple, direct way, and in a businesslike tone of voice.
3. **Do not give too many commands at once.** Most children are able to follow ONE or TWO instructions at a time. Try giving only one specific instruction at a time. If you want your child to do something that is complicated or involves more than a few steps, then break it down into smaller steps and give one step at a time.
4. **Make sure the child is paying attention to you.** Be sure that you have EYE CONTACT with your child. If necessary, gently turn the child's face toward yours to ensure that he or she is listening and watching when the command is given. Get down to your child's eye level to make eye contact if necessary.
5. **Let the child know when you expect him or her to comply with the directive.** Make sure you let the child know when you expect them to do what it is you have asked of him or her. For instance, you may want him or her to immediately wash up and come to dinner. Or, you may want the child to turn off the TV and begin working on his or her homework within the next 15 minutes. In either case, let your child know when you expect them to comply.
6. **Reduce all distractions before giving the command.** This is a very common mistake. Often parents try to give instructions while the child is watching TV, listening to music, or playing a video game. Parents cannot expect children to pay attention to them when something more entertaining is going on in the room. Turn off these distractions yourself or tell the child to turn them off before giving the command.
7. **Ask the child to repeat the command.** This should be done if you are not sure your child heard or understood the command. Also, for children with a short attention span, having them repeat the command appears to increase the likelihood they will follow through.
8. **Give praise for compliance.** Praise your child immediately for a job well done, or for any praise worthy behavior.

1. **Rules should be detailed & state how the youth's compliance is to be measured and monitored.** Parents should expect the youth to try to circumvent the rules; the parents shouldn't be too apologetic about investigating whether the youth is following the rules; parent is collecting evidence to rebuild trust. Monitoring is to be expected in the beginning. For example, curfews must be specific; flexibility can be helpful but discussed up front (e.g. grace window of 10 minutes).
2. **Consequences must matter to the teen:** When possible, each rule should be associated with a positive consequence for compliance and a negative consequence for noncompliance—and they should be logical and fitting (e.g., if youth is late for dinner, then he makes his own dinner OR coming home late from curfew results in the next social event being cancelled, but coming home on time could be rewarded with an hour extension). Food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and parental love are rights and should not be on a rewards list. However, cell phone, transportation, material possessions, spending money, etc. are not rights. Adolescents may think that they are entitled to these things. But, it is therapeutic to reframe these "rights" as "privileges."
3. **Consequences need to be administered with consistency:** parents often make the mistake of threatening too much and grounding too little; don't announce punishments out of excessive anger and resist temptations to reduced promised punishments because they feel sorry for the youth.
4. **Consequences need to be arranged in a hierarchy:** parents need to be equipped with a hierarchy of consequences to deal with refusals to accept punishments. This can include several levels:
 - Level 1:** Negative consequences including restriction of privileges, loss of allowance
 - Level 2:** Increased versions of level 1 (e.g., longer restrictions or reductions in restrictions with immediate compliance). Parents should use punishment they can control (don't fight over remote control if kid watches TV out of defiance—remove allowance instead).
 - Level 3:** Parents can be more creative at this level. For example, remove computer from room, favorite clothing, make-up, video games (with the immediate return when compliance is achieved).
 - Level 4:** "Parental strikes" are high level consequence. Parents stop providing some services they normally do for their children—transportation, laundry, cooking.

Example

- Parent tells the youth to take out the garbage and he refuses
- Parent attempts to implement a time out, but teen refuses to comply with punishment
- Parent tells the youth he is grounded for the weekend, but when Saturday night arrives, he walks out of the house and gets into a car with his friends
- Parent responds by switching consequences that do not require the youth's cooperation
- The caregiver removes several of the youth's favorite possessions, and when this does not bring him under control...
- Parent goes on strike
- For the youth to regain his possessions and parent services, he must obey all directives he originally defied (complete the weekend grounding, then the time out, and finally take out the garbage).

Talking with Teens Effectively

- Sequence of “soft-hard-soft” approach recommended when conflict arises.
- Parent engages in reasonable, limited discussion of the rule or consequence, hears the teen’s opinions and concerns, and responds as she thinks appropriate.
- Parent ends the discussion, states her final decision, and no matter what the teen’s reaction, implements her decision with no more discussion. Parent maintains a firm stance and refuses further discussion until the teen complies with the rule and/or accepts the consequence.
- After teen accepts the consequence, the parent returns to a soft approach by offering empathy, nurturance, and further explanation about the rule, if teen wants.
- When arguments become a matter of manipulation, power struggle, or personal attack, parents should take control by ending the conversation. This means resisting to get the last word in, announcing that the discussion is over, and if necessary, walking away.
- Control the length of the argument while ensuring that the teen has an opportunity to state his point: after the parent proposes his rule or decision and engages in as much discussion as seems appropriate, he gives the teen a final opportunity to argue for the option she wants. During this time, the parent does not interrupt or even speak but listens attentively to the teen until she is finished (perhaps even writing down some notes). Then, the parent goes into the other room, alone, and thinks for a few moments. Finally, the parent returns and announces his decision, which is now final. Parents have heard out the teen, and should ignore all further arguing.
- Choose your battles wisely rather than attempting to change every detail of the youth’s behavior that you do not like. Parents should be firm about behaviors related to safety, important values, and preparing to be an adult. It is generally wise to be flexible about more superficial choices such as dress, hair, and entertainment. It is also recommended that parents not reprimand the teen when they exhibit a negative attitude (e.g., muttering, scowling, or stomping).
- Parents should intersperse warm, positive experiences for the teen in the midst of limit setting, negative consequences, and confrontations. Parents can do this by providing favors, treats, and expressions of affection, even small, casual gestures.
- Efforts to build more affectionate relationships between parents and adolescents should include making plans for shared, enjoyable activities. The activities should be scheduled to occur every week or two and should take place even if the teen is grounded or the parents are on strike. These activities send the message that parent’s love is unconditional.

Adapted from:

Your Defiant Child by Russell Barkley