

Back to School Agony

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The ‘back-to-school’ season has arrived! Preparing for school is a stressful proposition for every family, but for some parents back-to-school anxieties run deeper than finding the time and money to buy everything needed for classes. What if you also have to brace yourself for difficult mornings, hours spent begging, bribing, or fighting with your child to complete their homework, or even go to school in the first place? What if your back-to-school season feels more like torture than anticipation?



Year after year, dealing with the same challenges, many parents begin to feel helpless, blame themselves, and lose hope of things ever improving. Truthfully, there is no single approach that is going to work for every child, but just because you haven’t found a system that works for your family yet doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. While there may not be a universal “cure” for this kind of resistance and rebellion, there are some nearly universal guidelines to keep in mind when responding to defiant kids.

First, remember that you are *the parent*. Being “*the parent*” means that it is your responsibility to respond calmly and firmly to your child’s behavior. When children argue, resist, threaten, and lash out, *fighting* back is possibly the least effective thing you can do. Arguing with your child adds fuel to the conflict, and unintentionally sends a message that the child has an equal measure of authority.

Instead, be assertive about your instructions, and make clear what the consequences will be if the child does not comply. You do not need your child’s permission to be the parent, and you do not need to convince them of the validity of your decisions. You may even be surprised by how quickly your child ‘gives up’ arguing once they get the message that it isn’t getting them anywhere. Possibly the biggest challenge to presenting this kind of confidence and firmness is that when children are defiant, it hurts. Hearing your child yell, insult you, or say they hate you cuts to the quick, and it’s no wonder that many parents get overwhelmed and fight back when they are attacked. Whether it’s a spouse, friend, or even a counselor, get the support of someone who understands your battle, and can help you manage your pain and doubts.

It is absolutely beneficial for your child to know that their words or actions were hurtful, but being *the parent* means that it’s your responsibility to deal with your hurt outside of the conflict. In fact, being in control of yourself carries many benefits: it provides a model for your child of what to do when they’re feeling strong emotions, and demonstrates to your child that you will continue to function as a parent regardless of what they do.

Children who have difficulty managing their behavior often need the structure of your consistency in order to feel safe. To a child who feels an emotional whirlwind inside, inconsistencies in your reactions, the level of emotion expressed when they rebel, or the type and severity of consequences that occur when they act out, can feel like a confirmation that the world around them is unpredictable, and may even convince them that trying to manage their own emotions or responses is hopeless. Creating consistency in a hectic life is no easy proposition. Consider creating plans for the problem behaviors that occur most frequently.

Determine what you will say, and choose realistic consequences for that behavior. Having a plan not only helps you create a stable environment, it can also help you keep your cool, because you don’t need to re-invent the wheel every time a negative behavior occurs.

Parenting can so often feel like an impossible assignment, especially when your child is defiant. Remember that it is not necessary for you to be perfect in order to help your child overcome challenging behavior patterns. In fact, providing a positive example by apologizing when it’s needed and correcting the error or improving on the plan for next time, and not giving up, is one of the best lessons you can ever teach your child.



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