

You can't make me!

Dealing with a defiant child. BY STACEY STEIN



Eileen Cukier's constant battles with daughter Alyssa typically started first thing in the morning. Whether it was refusing to put on proper shoes or insisting on summer shorts on a chilly day, the headstrong six-year-old bristled at the simplest requests.

"If she had it in her head that she didn't need to do it, or if she didn't want to do it, she just wouldn't do it," says Eileen, 41, who lives in Mississauga, Ont.

Alyssa's defiant personality became evident at 18 months, "once she started understanding what was going on around her," and if she deemed a request unacceptable, "she would either say 'no' or turn her back and walk away or continue doing what she was doing," says the mom of two.

Persistent defiant behaviour tests the resolve of even the most patient parents, but experts say caregivers need to remember this is a normal part of development.

"Defiance - or strong-willed behaviour - is pretty common, especially at ages two, three and four," says Dr. Greg Schoepp, a child psychologist with the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton. "Kids in the toddler years start to get a sense of identity, and there certainly can be an increase in kids showing some attitude or talking back."

The key is to try and turn things around early. Many parents revert to punishment mode when their child is

being intransigent, but Dr. Schoepp says this can end up backfiring.

Often, the only time when many parents pay attention is when their children are misbehaving, and then they discipline, says Dr. Schoepp. "Over time, kids are getting little attention for their positive behaviour, and parents spend more time paying attention to the not-OK behaviour."

This is why he counsels parents to pay more attention to their child's positive behaviour. Instead of using "stop" or "don't" commands, Dr. Schoepp urges parents to focus on using "start" or "do" commands.

"When you're in the negative reinforcement trap you're spending most of your time saying 'why are you doing this? I've told you a hundred times not to do this,'" says Dr. Schoepp. He also recommends labelling positive behaviours, so if your little one is sharing toys with a sibling, make sure you say something like "I really like it when you share with your little sister."

Parents of strongly defiant children should also tailor their approach based on their kid's personality. Providing options has worked well for Kayla Wilcox, whose three-year-old son Edward became very defiant soon after his twin siblings were born.

"It's a choice between something less desirable and something that we want him to do," says Kayla, 30, who lives in

Fredericton, N.B.

No matter how frustrated she may feel, Kayla says she is careful not to lose her temper. "Kids learn a lot more from what you do than from what you say," she says. "If we're trying to teach him how to control his emotions, it's vital that we control ours."

Dr. Schoepp echoes that sentiment and points out a key step in dealing with defiant behaviour is to examine the relationship you have with your child and make sure it's a positive one.

"Some of the parents I see are pretty deflated and really fed up with their kids," he says. "If you don't have a reasonably positive relationship with your child, it doesn't matter how much you discipline, it's not going to work."

For Eileen Cukier, endless patience, a willingness to learn and adapt, and a refusal to give in have made a huge difference. "We took the time to explain to Alyssa *why* we were asking things, instead of just asking her to do things, and now in the mornings she's like a superstar," says Eileen.

Her advice for other parents? "Don't give in because it's the easy way," she says. "Hold strong and battle through it because the end result will be much better. This is not an easy job by any stretch, but the payoff is unbelievable." ○

Toddler troubles?

Learn how to win over your stubborn toddler at ParentsCanada.com/stubborn.

WHEN SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

Oppositional Defiant Disorder is characterized by extreme defiant behaviour that leads to social or academic problems. If your child displays four or more of these behaviours over a period lasting at least six months, it may be time to seek help.

→ often loses temper

→ often argues with adults

→ often actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules

→ often deliberately annoys people

→ often blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehaviour

→ is often touchy or easily annoyed by others

→ is often angry or resentful

→ is often spiteful or vindictive

Source: American Psychiatric Association