

# Defiance and Power Struggles

## Age 2 Summary

### Why Defiance and Power Struggles?

Whether your child is telling you “no” when you need to get them dressed or crying while refusing to leave the house for a commitment, learning how to deal with defiance and your child’s attempts to gain control can become a regular challenge if you don’t create plans and strategies for managing those moments.

**Tip:** These steps are best done when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip:** Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.



**Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input**

- Ask your child, “*How do you feel? How do you think I feel?*” Two-year-olds do not yet have a feelings vocabulary and cannot describe their body sensations when upset or dealing with big feelings. They will need your support to be successful.
  - For example, if your child is making a disagreeable facial expression, say, “*Freeze*,” like a game. Pull out the mirror, ask them to repeat the face, and ask what that facial expression represents. For example, “*Your eyebrows are squished down, and your mouth is frowning. Are you feeling mad?*”
  - Sometimes, children can feel interrogated by too many questions. You can also use reflective narrative, without questions, to invite your child’s curiosity about their feelings. For example, “*You went down the slide by yourself; I wonder if you are feeling proud.*”
- Ask about how they feel when they can do something on their own. Then, ask them about times when they need to ask for help. Let them know that everyone, even parents and those in a parenting role, has occasions when they need help.
- Use your best listening skills! Remember, what makes a parent or someone in a parenting role angry or frustrated can differ significantly from what angers or frustrates a child. Listen closely to your child’s concerns without projecting your thoughts and feelings.

- Remember, a child's behaviors are often influenced by their feelings. Feelings are spontaneous reactions to people, places, and experiences. Feelings are not right or wrong, but what your child does with them may be appropriate or inappropriate.



## Teach New Skills

- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child acts defiantly, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice that can replace the defiant behavior.
- Allow your child some control by providing them with choices throughout the day. Allow your child to choose between two options that are acceptable to you. For example, *"Would you like to brush your teeth or hair first?"* *"Would you like to wear your red or blue coat?"*
- Set aside 5-10 minutes a day when your child gets to choose the play and your child gets to direct you. During this special play time, follow your child's lead.
- Raising your voice and your level of upset in response to your child's defiant behavior or arguments will only increase the intensity and duration of your child's upset. Yelling only communicates that you are raising the emotional intensity, not diminishing it. If you yell at your child, your child will likely miss the lesson you want to emphasize entirely and may also feel unsafe, which can negatively impact the relationship with your child.
- Reflect on your child's defiant words and actions or when they test boundaries so you can be prepared to help. Ask yourself,
  - "How can my child gain control in healthy, acceptable ways?" Don't forget that seeking control is a human need, but how we seek control is critical to growing competence. Kids spend most of their day following the commands of others. Allow safe, age-appropriate opportunities for your child to have control.
  - Think about your most challenging moments. Does it occur at a time when it makes sense to proactively offer your child two limited authentic choices - no matter how small - to provide them with a sense of control? For example, *"We must draw a thank you note for Grandma. Do you want to use crayons or markers?"*
  - Is a challenging moment an opportunity to build leadership skills? Can you ask for help when your child is seeking control? For example, if your child says, "No! I won't go to the store," you might say, *"I need your help finding the right socks. You'll know the right ones better than I will. Will you help me find them?"*
  - Allow your child to supply answers; you may be surprised at how many options they come up with. Support and guide them in selecting one and doing it.

**Trap:** If you tell or even command your child to make an apology, how will they ever learn to apologize genuinely? Apologizing or making things right should never be assigned as a punishment because the control lies with the adult. This robs the child of the opportunity to learn the skill and internalize the value of repairing harm. Instead, ask the child how they feel they should compensate for the hurt they've caused and help them implement their idea.



## Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Allow your child the chance to take steps to meet their significant challenges, whether they are working on tasting new foods for the first time, exploring the objects in their environment, or attempting to communicate with new words or phrases.
- Use “Show me...” statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity.” When a child learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say: “*Show me how you can take deep breaths to help you calm down.*” This can be used when you observe their upset mounting. Or, when a disagreement typically ensues, and you’ve taught them new ways to use their control, you can prompt them by saying, “*Show me how you get in your car seat comfortably and safely.*”
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements like, “*I noticed how you took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. That’s excellent!*”
- Accept feelings. If you will help your child better manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings - even ones you don’t like! When your child is upset, consider your response. You could say, “*I hear you’re upset. What can you do to help yourself feel better?*”
- Practice deep breathing. Because deep breathing is such a simple practice that can assist your child anytime, anywhere, it’s important to get plenty of practice to make it easy to use when needed. Here are some enjoyable ways to practice together!<sup>A2</sup>
  - *Teddy Bear Belly Breathing.* Balance a teddy bear on your child’s tummy and give it a ride with the rising and falling of their breath. This would be ideal to practice during your bedtime routine when you lie and want to calm down for the evening.
  - *Blowing Out Birthday Candles Breathing.* You can pretend you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Just the image in your head of a birthday cake brings about happy thoughts. To blow out several small flames, you have to take deep breaths.
- Practice everyday skills. Your two-year-old will be learning how to do simple, everyday tasks like buttoning their coat on their own, so take time out to practice when you are not feeling pressured for time. Allow your child the opportunity, with your loving support, to go slowly as they attempt to button a coat.

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## Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Scaffold your child's learning to help set them up for success. For example, *"We are headed to the playground. I know it's tough to leave when you're having fun. Remember, I'll remind you to do your last fun activity before we go. If you feel upset, we can take some deep breaths together."*
- Learn about your child's development. Each new age presents different challenges, and being informed about your child's developmental milestones promotes empathy and patience.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can offer additional support and motivation for your child when challenging issues arise.
- Apply logical consequences when needed. Logical consequences should follow soon after the behavior and need to be provided in a way that maintains a healthy relationship. Rather than punishment, a consequence is about supporting the learning process. First, make sure you are calm. Not only is this good modeling, but when you are calm, you can provide logical consequences that fit the behavior. Second, invite your child to discuss the expectations established (earlier in this tool in Step 2). Third, if you feel your child is not holding up their end of the bargain (unless they do not know how), apply a logical consequence as a teachable moment.

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## Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when it is going well: *"I noticed when you got upset, you hugged your bear. That's the way to feel better."*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after getting through your bedtime routine, snuggle together and read before bed.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2024). *Defiance and Power Struggles Age 2 Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ToolsforYourChildsSuccess.org>

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