

Defiance and Power Struggles

Age 3 Summary

Why Defiance and Power Struggles?

Whether your child is angrily telling you “no” when you need to get them dressed or crying hysterically while refusing to leave the house for a commitment, learning how to deal with defiance and your child’s attempts to gain power 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.

STEP 1 **GET INPUT** **Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input**

- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, *“How do you feel? How do you think I feel?”* *Three-to-four-year-olds* are beginning to understand that their bodies, thoughts, and feelings are their own and are growing in their sense of empathy for others. They will need your support to understand and deal with their big feelings successfully.
 - 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?”*
- 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.
- 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, has occasions when they need to ask for help.
- When reading books, look at the images of children or animals and guess the feelings by asking, *“What do you think this character is thinking? What do you think that character is feeling?”*

- Use your best listening skills! Remember, what makes a parent angry or frustrated can differ significantly from what angers or frustrates a child. Listen closely to your child's concerns without projecting your thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

STEP

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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 coat or your blue coat?”*
- Raising your voice and your level of upset in response to your child’s defiant behavior or boundary testing 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 feel unsafe, which can negatively impact the relationship with your child.
- Play together using control positively. Pinpoint a challenging time of day, such as bedtime. Enlist a stuffed friend or doll for your child to teach. Ask, *“How can we teach your bear about our bedtime routine?”* And be sure to ask, *“What does the bear find tough about going to bed? How could we make him more comfortable with it?”* Use this as a time to empower your child in ways that can help them succeed with typically challenging behaviors.
- Brainstorm coping strategies. You and your child can use numerous coping strategies depending on what feels right. But when angry and upset, recalling what will make you feel better can be challenging. That’s why brainstorming a list, writing it down, and keeping it ready can be helpful when your child needs it. Some ideas include imagining your favorite place, taking a walk, drinking water, taking deep breaths, counting, drawing, or building something.
- Reflect on your child’s defiant words and actions or when they attempt to 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 in growing competence.
 - 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 need to pick up the toys before dinnertime. Do you want to start in the living room or your bedroom?”*
 - Is a challenging moment an opportunity to build leadership skills? Can you ask for help when your child is seeking power? For example, if your child says, *“No! I don’t want to leave the park,”* you might say, *“Our next activity is getting ready for*

lunch. I need your help to pick out the cups and plates we should use. Will you help me decide which ones are best for today?"

- Find small opportunities to help your child mend relationships if harm's been caused between children. Siblings offer a regular chance to practice this! If there's fighting, talk to your child about how they feel first. When you've identified that they had a role in causing harm, brainstorm together how they might make their sibling feel better. You might ask, *"What could you do?"*
- 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.

STEP
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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 disagreement typically ensues, and you've taught them new ways to use their control, you can prompt by saying, *"Show me how you can get ready to leave on time. I will set a timer."* This can be used when you observe their upset mounting.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like, *"I noticed how you started to get frustrated when you were buttoning your coat, but you took some deep breaths and kept trying. That's excellent!"*
- Accept feelings. If you will help your child become emotionally intelligent in managing 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 everyday skills. Because your three-to-four-year-old will be gaining independence to do simple, everyday tasks like buttoning their coat on their own, 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.

**STEP
4****Support Your Child's Development and Success**

- Ask key questions to support their skills. 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 that 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.

**STEP
5****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.

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