

WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WHO ARE DEFIANT

Unconditional Respect Comes First

By Gordon R. Hodas, MD

Introduction:

Whether you are a mental health professional, mental health worker, case worker, drug counselor, teacher, parent, or other helping individual, working with children and adolescents who are challenging (referred to as children) is not easy. This is especially the case with children who are angry, defiant, or violent. Such children can be frustrating, and have a way of “pulling the strings” of the most well-intentioned individuals.

My intention here is not to outline a complete treatment for working with challenging, defiant children, but rather to identify one precondition for successful long-term intervention – the provision of unconditional respect. The idea is that, while respect alone may be insufficient to produce desired change, its absence makes meaningful, long-term change highly unlikely.

Three Propositions Regarding Children and Adolescents Who Are Defiant:

Consider the following three propositions:

1. *Children and adolescents who are angry, defiant, and violent cannot be bullied into prosocial behavior. [Prosocial behavior refers to peaceful, socially acceptable behavior by a child or adolescent that does not occur *only* when the individual is being monitored, or *for the sole purpose* of avoiding legal or other adult-based consequences.]*
2. *Children and adolescents tend to behave consistent with the expectations held by important adults in their lives, and consistent with the way they are treated.*
3. *Both ethically and pragmatically, an appropriate approach to children and adolescents who are defiant includes the provision of unconditional respect.*

On initial glance, these three statements may appear obvious. Unfortunately, however, actual practice in mental health, other helping professions, and education is not always consistent with the thrust of these propositions. In fact, there are some who would argue that “conduct disordered kids” will not benefit from a respectful approach and will endlessly manipulate adults who relate to them in that way. These children, it is argued, need to be “broken down” or “put in their place,” in order to learn that they cannot get away with everything. Within such a framework, attempts may be made to “scare straight” the child, “read them the riot act,” or otherwise humiliate or shame them in some manner.

In order to promote meaningful, long-term outcomes for children who are challenging, let us consider each of the above propositions more carefully.

1. **Children and adolescents who are angry, defiant, and violent cannot be bullied into prosocial behavior:**

The humiliation or shaming of children, whether pursued deliberately based on ideology, spontaneously based on an effort to be "real," or inadvertently based on lack or awareness or a loss of self-control, in all cases represents a step backward. Children who are angry and defiant, it must be appreciated, are emotionally vulnerable and are extraordinarily sensitive to imbalances in power, perceived lack of fairness, and situations that cause them to lose face. The more vulnerable the child, the more sensitive to being "dissed" or disrespected.

When perceived or actual humiliation occurs, the child feels compelled to fight back and "get even." Such retaliation may occur immediately, leading to a crisis, or may be suppressed, only to be expressed at a later time. In the latter case, when the child suppresses an immediate response, the adult may mistakenly conclude that the child has "learned a lesson" as a result of the confrontation. However, there exists what I regard as "a law of interpersonal reactivity," which play out with children as follows: Any adult behavior that humiliates a child leads to an equally (or greater) negative, self-defeating response on the part of the child, immediately or some time later. Such "acting out" may lead to further humiliation being directed at the child, who then continues the oppositional cycle of protest through further inappropriate behavior. Upon repeated shaming by an adult, the child does indeed "learn," but the child's learning involves a confirmation of the world as dangerous and humiliating, rather than an appreciation of the value of working cooperatively with others.

When violent behavior ensues, according to Ken Hardy, teacher and researcher at Syracuse University, it is often the outcome of rage rather than anger. Rage is a more intense emotion than anger, and is based on long-standing experiences of humiliation and disqualification. When a child's rage is not acknowledged and addressed, it may lead to violence, loss of empathy, and profound devaluation of human life.

Former prison psychiatrist, James Gilligan, while discussing adult offenders who are violent, offers a formulation that applies to children as well. Humiliation and shaming, he explains, increase the individual's devaluation of human life and the likelihood of future violence:

... the more harshly we punish criminals, or children, the more violent they become; the punishment increases the feelings of shame and simultaneously decreases their capacities for feelings of love for others, and of guilt toward others.

A vicious cycle is created with violent individuals. Harshness increases the child's sense of shame and humiliation, which intensifies his/her need to get even violently. The more the child acts violently, the more he/she loses the capacity for empathy and relatedness – and the harsher the punishment by the adult authority that follows.

2. Children and adolescents tend to behave consistent with expectations held by important adults in their lives, and consistent with the way that they are treated.

It is well recognized that people tend to respond according to the expectations of others. A facilitative setting tends to bring out more competent, persistent behaviors, while a non-facilitative setting results in poorer performance and premature giving up. In discussing this pattern in the classroom, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, a physician and public health official in Massachusetts, offers the following comments:

Social scientists and educators have proven time and again that children tend to perform academically as they are expected to perform. By and large, children who are expected by their parents and teachers to work hard and achieve, do just that. When teachers, administrators, and parents do not expect much, children do not rouse themselves ... Children who are labeled "dumb" tend to become dumb to meet the expectations of those in authority. (Deadly Consequences: How Violence is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problem, p. 164).

Given their lack of maturity and their rapid development flux, children are even more susceptible to the expectations of others than are most adults.

Children also tend to incorporate and internalize behavior that they observe and experience directly. The child who is "put in his place" by an adult authority is likely to repeat such behavior, with the same or other adults, and with peers. Despite the bravado of children who claim indifference to what adults may be saying or doing, their antennae are sharp indeed. This is why Geoffrey Canada, the founder of the Rheedlen School in Harlem and a keynote speaker at the 1998 Federation of Families Annual Meeting, has stated that "children are programmed to learn from adults; that's how our species has survived and prospered" (Reaching Up for Manhood, p. 75). It behooves us to remember that such programming implies the possibility of powerful positive influences on children, not just negative ones.

3. Both ethically and pragmatically, the appropriate approach to children who are defiant includes the unconditional provision of respect.

The need for respect appears to be universal and cross-cultural. It can be regarded as a fundamental human need. The child denied respect in turn abandons reciprocal, respectful interactions with mainstream adults and develops instead what can be regarded as a secret "code," which guides future behavior. For some children, behavior becomes deviant in support of activities that may promise respect (e.g., gang membership or drug dealing). For other children, deviant behavior may be less purposeful and represents primarily a protest against past injustices. Dynamics such as these operate with nearly every angry, defiant child, so it is important to take the time to learn about the child's life experiences, social context, and personal needs, so that eventually the child's "code" is broken.

A poignant example of such a code is provided by novelist/essayist John Edgar Wideman, twice winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award. In his highly personal book, *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman introduces us to his younger brother, Robby, who is incarcerated for life for murder. While being interviewed for the book, Robby explains to his brother how his behavior prior to incarceration reflected both a need for self-definition and a protest:

Me and trouble hooked up. See, it was a question of being somebody. Being my own person ... Love you all but wasn't room left for me. Had to figure out a new territory. I had to be a rebel. (p. 85).

Ethically, based on CASSP Principles and other humanistic considerations, it is difficult to reconcile being a helper if one is not committed to provide unconditional respect to youth. Such commitment should be differentiated from moments of frustration, when the adult may fall short. However, when this has occurred, an acknowledgment and an apology to the child becomes appropriate.

Validation of the child's need for respect comes from many sources. For example, anthropologist Phillippe Bourgois, focusing on the Puerto Rican barrio in New York, came to realize that the function of drug-dealing may not be based primarily on economic profitability:

...crack dealers ... are not driven solely by simple economic exigency. Like most humans on earth, in addition to material subsistence, they are also searching for dignity and fulfillment. In the Puerto Rican context this incorporates definitions of "respect" built around a personal concern for autonomy, self-assertion, and community ... (p. 324).

For this reason, Bourgois entitles his book *In Search of Respect*, and advocates for a social contact based on "the politics of mutual respect," which involves prevention and "establishing long-term relationships based on trust" (p. 13).

The Need to Differentiate Respect from "Being Soft":

Those who believe that the provision of unconditional respect to children who are defiant represents a "soft" response to their transgressions need to recognize the distinction between respect and accountability – e.g., offering respect need not entail abandoning accountability. In fact, one can simultaneously offer respect and also hold a child accountable. Consider, for example, the atmosphere created at Harlem's Rheedlen School, as described by Geoffrey Canada. The school security staff are responsible for school safety, but they meet their responsibility in ways that also value the students:

The young men and women who make up our security team really like the children and don't try to intimidate them. When there's a problem, they try to reason, but they are firm. They don't believe in using force or bad language, or in bending the rules (Fist Stick Knife Gun, 1995, p. 141).

It is apparent that reasoning with children and avoiding bad language, intimidation, and unnecessary force – all manifestations of *respect* toward children – in no way results in a bending of the rules. The students at Rheedlen are still held *accountable* for their behavior. Respect for children at Rheedlen is not limited to just security staff, nor is it an impersonal process. Canada describes how male teachers and male support staff function at Rheedlen:

... men holding children's hands, wiping their tears away, reading them stories ... (so that the children) grow up knowing how normal it is for men to show concern, love, and tenderness for children. (Reaching Up for Manhood, p. 52).

Unconditional respect for children, therefore, does not entail a lack of either expectations or consequences. A lack of expectations – as, for example, when adults mistakenly assume that children have no useful ideas to contribute to their home, school, or community and disregard their comments – is in fact, disrespectful, and is also inconsistent with prosocial outcomes. Similarly, failure to apply consequences when rules or expectations have been violated is disrespectful to the child, and is also inconsistent with prosocial outcomes. Thus, contrary to the ideas of some, both expectations and consequences are *essential aspects* of unconditional respect, rather than elements overlooked or sacrificed by the commitment to respect.

Another misconception is that unconditional respect means that a child can never be challenged. On the contrary, a respectful relationship allows for, even demands, challenge at certain times, so long as the challenge is offered constructively. Failing to challenge a child to do better, when

indicated, is in fact disrespectful. What is essential is that the challenge—whether verbal or non-verbal, direct or indirect, serious or humorous—uphold the dignity of the child.

Conclusion:

In working with children who are angry, defiant, and violent, the goal is not merely to coerce short-term behavioral compliance, nor to require that anger or rage be suppressed. What is essential is that the child experience him or herself treated consistently and respectfully, supported while held to clear standards, given reasonable consequences when indicated, and – perhaps most importantly – listened to and encouraged to use words constructively. In this way, the child's code becomes known and eventually unnecessary, and prosocial behaviors become internalized.

To fully understand the concept of unconditional respect, one must appreciate that respect involves a way of viewing, being with, and responding to another person. Respect does not require blindness to violations of rules and limits. Similarly, respect does not require silence instead of challenge and tactful confrontation, when appropriate. Respect involves using the relationship to help the child overcome a specific dilemma or limitation, in a manner that models prosocial behavior and that promotes trust.

In the final analysis, respect entails a readiness to offer realistic hopefulness to the child, to recognize strengths, and to avoid the temptation to give up when the going gets rough. To accomplish these lofty goals, it is important that adults cultivate both self-awareness and self-control, since working with any child produces frustration.

In discussing the needs of young males, Geoffrey Canada offers a clear perspective on the need for realistic hopefulness that I find relevant to both genders:

We ... have to make sure that there are always... people in a boy's life who haven't given up on him – a family member, a teacher, or a mentor. This doesn't mean that we suddenly become pushovers, that we allow boys to escape unpunished or undisciplined after wrongful acts. It does mean that we always give them the message of salvation and forgiveness with our chastisements. It is important that even when we are at our wits' end we don't say things like, 'There's no hope for you' or 'I can tell you'll never change.' We need to say ... 'I know you can change.' (*Reaching Up for Manhood*, 1998, p. 103).

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