

## Parenting Help

**This is an excerpt from a Question and Answer Magazine column that Dr. Taft wrote several years ago and while the problems might not be the exact same as yours we feel the answers can be relevant and helpful to us all.**

**We have a 6-year-old little girl who is mostly obedient and kind hearted. However, lately she has begun talking back and arguing with us a lot. She throws fits when we tell her no or give her an answer she thinks is unacceptable. She will clench her fists and grit her teeth and usually say something like “meany mom”. We want to train her to deal with her anger in a responsible way and also not to argue with us or talk back when she disagrees. It seems as if she always has to have the last word and demands to be heard. Please help us know how to effectively deal with this problem. We want to equip her for a productive life and healthy relationships with others. What do we do?**

Your daughter is blessed to have parents that consider her present and future emotional needs. Your daughter appears to be expressing needs for individuation. When this occurs it's like the child is saying, “You are treating me like a little baby. I am feeling older and more capable of making choices and decisions.” A need for individuation is quite normal and will surface many times throughout a child's development. The most notable times for this are the “terrible twos” and adolescence. When a child or adolescent is struggling with a need for individuation, they often become oppositional, argumentative and resistant. The goal of their behavior is to increase their feelings of independence and self-responsibility. However, they often try to achieve this goal in a destructive manner by engaging you in a power struggle so that they can change your “no” to “yes”. But, if they accomplish that it will not be healthy for them. View this as an opportunity to help her meet her needs for age-appropriate independence as well as to learn several important life lessons: accepting “no” for an answer; expressing frustration and anger, recognizing and submitting to authority figures and resolving conflict.

First, you stated that she is mostly obedient and kind hearted, so realize that you have a lot to work with. To help her meet her individuation need in a productive

encourage leadership if she has a younger sibling. Also consider allowing her to take the lead in some activities. For example, allow her to decide what game to play with you and how to play it. This will really empower her and bolster her sense of confidence and independence.

Next, examine the interaction patterns between parent and child. How does mother/father respond when she is compliant, playful, quietly engaged in an activity, kind-hearted, cooperative, helpful, loving, etc? Conversely, how does mother/father respond when she is oppositional, argumentative and defiant? Which behaviors get more energy from the parent? Do you engage with her more intensely when she misbehaves or behaves? If you find that you react more intensely when she misbehaves but are relatively boring when she behaves you will need to change that pattern. Children seek their parents' energy and they repeat behaviors that energize their parents. The next time she is helpful or she accepts no for an answer you should hug her and thank her for her choice to be helpful or for her decision to take "no" for an answer. In general, praise her and engage with her when she displays neutral and positive behaviors. A good goal to strive for is to "sprinkle" her with specific praise 20- 30 times each day. Now I know that sounds like a lot but consider how much time and energy you spend with her when she is acting oppositional. Realize that 20 – 30 specific praise interactions may only take 15 – 30 total minutes of your time throughout an entire day. Which way do you and your husband want to spend time with your daughter?

On the other hand, when she defiantly talks back to you, remove your energy from the conflict. This is important because you will teach her about emotional awareness, emotional control, conflict resolution and respect for authority. In essence, she will learn how to handle disagreements by your behavioral/emotional example. If you yell, threaten, physically overpower, lecture, bribe, etc. to gain her compliance, guess what she will learn? Both parents should share the roles of praising their children and giving them consequences.

To successfully give consequences you need to **1) Control your emotions and speak in a firm but neutral tone (put on your "pokerface")**. **2) Label her emotions and state the rule she broke**, "I see you are angry. Anger is ok but talking back is not." **3) Give a consequence**: "You need to take a time out for talking back." **4) Follow through with the consequence**. **5) Praise her** "You did a great job completing that time out. Thank you for cooperating."

I recommend a short time out not to exceed one minute no matter how old the child. The time out should be just long enough for her to show you compliance. When I work with defiant children I say, “Time out begins when your hands, feet and mouth are quiet and ends when I say it ends.” Then, praise her for accepting her consequence, calming herself down and using self-control. Most importantly, be consistent. Increase your attention and energy when things are going right and use the five steps of correction above when things are going wrong. Time out does not work if children receive relatively little energy for neutral and positive behavior. Time out was never intended to be a punishment. It was intended to be a brief time away from the good stuff: parental energy and privileges (“Time In”).

When she tries to get in the last word and engage you in an argument, simply (and calmly) repeat one of the following phrases: “You are choosing not to listen, you need to take your time out” or “I love you too much to argue, you need to take your time out.” You may need to gently escort her to time out and help her sit in it the first few times if she continues to push limits. Her defiant behavior pattern will change once she understands that you are dedicated to seeing the consequence through without yelling or spanking.

Most people do not think this approach will work. They prefer feeling more powerful. So they subdue their child into compliance because it feels good and seems effective in the short run. But I ask you to consider how “Super nanny” achieves change on her television show with the worst behaved children on the planet! She does not yell, spank, lecture, threaten or bribe. She simply follows these basic steps and creates dramatic changes in very dysfunctional families.

You are on the right track because instead of just forcing your daughter to behave, you are considering your daughter’s true present and future needs. Remember that this article is just a place to begin learning the most effective ways to assist her in emotional and behavioral change. In a previous article I included websites on two of the best programs I have encountered. Many of the ideas and techniques I mention in this article are from these two approaches. I encourage you to purchase the book or DVD with either approach and become an expert.

“The Nurtured Heart Approach” by Howard Glasser -  
Website: [www.difficultchild.com](http://www.difficultchild.com)

“Love and Logic” by Jim Fay and Foster Cline, MD -  
Website: [www.loveandlogic.com](http://www.loveandlogic.com)