

Defiant Kids

Children want to be led, but they insist that their parents earn the right to lead them.

It's a wonderful fact that children will occasionally disobey their parents for the express purpose of testing just how much they can get away with. This is a game I call "Challenge the Chief," and it can be played with surprising skill—even by very young kids.

If you have children at home, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about. You have clearly and emphatically told your little girl, "Don't touch the lamp," only to turn around a moment later to see her flashing you an impish grin as her hand grasps the forbidden object. Or perhaps you've instructed your son to clean up his messy room or eat his vegetables, and he responds by setting his jaw, folding his arms and essentially saying, "Make me!"

Virtually every parent, the world over, has been issued an ultimatum of this nature at one time or another! But when moms and dads ignore this kind of challenge, something changes in the parent-child relationship. For a particularly strong-willed boy or girl, that early test of parental leadership can grow into a full-blown case of rebellion during the tumultuous days of adolescence.

The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents, but they insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them. If your son or daughter is repeatedly challenging your authority, I hope you won't tear your hair out or wave the white flag of surrender. There is a better way to handle these expressions of childhood defiance. Consider the following six principles:

1. Make sure you define the boundaries very clearly in advance. If you haven't spelled them out, don't try to enforce them.

2. When your child is defiant, respond with confident decisiveness. Don't be wishy-washy when your authority is clearly being challenged.

3. Distinguish between willful defiance and childish irresponsibility. Don't punish your kid simply for being a kid.

4. Reassure and teach after the confrontation is over. It is difficult to communicate to the child when you're both in the heat of the battle. After the time of conflict, during which you have demonstrated your right to lead, your child will probably want to be held and reassured, particularly if he is between 2 and 7 years of age and if the confrontation resulted in tears. By all means, open your arms and let him come.

Hold him close and tell him you love him. Rock him gently and let him know, again, why he was punished and how he can avoid the trouble next time. This moment of communication builds love, fidelity and family unity.

For Christian families, it is also extremely important to pray with the child during this time, admitting to God that we've all sinned and that no one is perfect. Divine forgiveness is a marvelous experience, even for a very young child.

5. Avoid impossible demands. Be absolutely sure your child is capable of delivering what you require. Never punish a child

for wetting the bed involuntarily, or for not becoming potty trained by 1 year of age, or for doing poorly in school when he's incapable of academic success. Demands such as these create an unresolvable conflict in the child and will cause damage to the human emotional apparatus.

6. Let love be your guide. A relationship that is characterized by genuine love and affection is likely to be a healthy one, even though we all know that parental mistakes and errors are inevitable.

These guidelines do not guarantee your child will be a perfect angel, of course. But they will help to facilitate relationships with your little ones that are characterized by sanity, order and respect—things every parent needs at home.

Dr. James Dobson brings parenting advice to your home with the Your Child: Essentials of Discipline video seminar. He discusses the most common mistakes made in disciplining children and teaches parents how to respond correctly to their child's misbehavior. To order a copy, call 1-800-A-FAMILY or go to

Dr. James Dobson is founder and chairman of the board of the nonprofit organization Focus on the Family (Colorado Springs, CO 80995; or). To read past columns in Charisma by James Dobson, log on at