



Academy At Home

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The 15-Day Fix to Stop Defiant Behaviour in its Tracks

Your child is openly, blatantly defiant and your confrontations sometimes escalate to violence. Traditional rewards and punishments don't help; sometimes, they hurt. So what do you do? Change focus. More specifically, change your mindset about bad behaviour and consequences, and manage your own mood to model how to behave in stressful situations. Start here with this 15-step action plan.



DAY 1

Start building the foundation for a strong parent-child relationship. Children can better cope with discipline from parents when they have bonding experiences that offset times of conflict. Starting today, set aside five to fifteen minutes daily of positive time together, doing things your child likes. During this time, start conversations by telling her about your day and asking for her opinion. Aim to take the focus off school or emotional difficulties, and provide a neutral common ground. During your time together, use positive reinforcement and remain upbeat; do not address any lingering academic or behavioural problems now.

DAY 2

Approach your child with compassion, recognising that he needs extra assistance — regardless of whether he admits it. Instead of seeing bad behaviour as defiance, remember that kids want to behave well and succeed. The emotional intensity and impulsivity of ADHD can just make it harder for them to do so. They are frustrated when they mess up all the time. Come from a place of wanting to help, rather than condemning bad behaviour. Today, remember that you're not letting them off the hook when they misbehave and you choose to focus on teaching them strategies to control their behaviour.

Let kids know that they can work toward better rules with good behaviour.

DAY 3

Dig deep to figure out why your child is having a problem meeting an expectation and then melting down. Today, take the assessment at livesinTheBalance.org to help identify your child's most daunting challenges, and find the right language to respond. Once you know the cause, it is easier to anticipate meltdowns and try to avoid them. If you must do something that you know can trigger a meltdown, plan ahead. Build in something you know interests your child, and promise an extra bonus if you can all keep your emotions in check. For example, if you have to make a trip to the shops, tell kids they can have a special snack and visit the pet store at the end of the trip if they behave. Or turn around negative emotions by giving a child a compliment or asking about something that is interesting to him during times you know are difficult.

Starting today, set aside five to fifteen minutes daily doing things your child likes.

DAY 4

Stay calm. Before trying to control your child's behaviour, you must gain control of your own emotions. Your actions need to convey, "I'm in control, and everything's OK. I'm not anxious. I am not going to freak out no matter what happens." Today, carve out time to take care of yourself and do things that are fulfilling for you so that you can feel emotionally stable. If your kids push your buttons, look at what has made you angry in the past to figure out your own triggers. Then ask yourself how you will react differently next time. When you react to your child, sit down. It is harder to yell and look angry when sitting. Then, speak in a calm, even tone.

DAY 5

Model how to take responsibility for your emotions. When tempers flare, it's easy to be triggered by your children's out-of-control emotions. When a meltdown happens today, pause and take a few deep breaths before reacting. This will move you away from your automatic stress response and into a place where you can use reason to respond. If you snap, or lose control, apologise to your kids. Say, "I was having a tough day, and I acted badly. It's not OK, but it's normal to act out sometimes. I'm sorry." This can show kids that a smart response to stress and anger is to take a break, have some water, and then own up to their actions.

DAY 6

Remove yourself or your child from the source of aggression. Sometimes kids get in a pattern of melting down for negative attention. Today, avoid this at all costs by removing all sources of attention during meltdowns. Put your child in a safe room with no access to you or rewards. If it's an older child, who you can't physically put in time out, remove yourself from the vicinity. Learn safe holds to restrain your child during a violent outburst so he doesn't hurt himself or others. Create a pattern so that when your child swears or is aggressive, parents automatically get up and leave the room.

DAY 7

Use movement to defuse the situation. Give kids a specific and concrete job to do when a situation is starting to escalate. You can say, "When I hear that tone, it tells me you're anxious, and I'd like to help. Why don't you go grab the crisps or popcorn and we can talk about it." This ritual does two things. It takes you out of the explosive moment, and gives you the chance to discuss what is wrong that is causing the behaviour, not the bad attitude. Eventually crisps or popcorn can become code for, "You'd better calm down." If snacks aren't your thing, try sitting down to colour when your child begins acting out. Offer your child a crayon without making eye contact, and say, "Hey, honey. You want to come colour this?" Then you can both work on an activity together.

If you are in public, try doing five star jumps. Kids will be so stunned by the weird behaviour it will often stop a fit. Then say, "Do you want to do five with me? Because I can tell you need to do something." All of these strategies demonstrate ways to calm down with movement, physical activity, and without an outburst.

DAY 8

Use structure to impose consequences so that you are both on the same team. Today, instead of using words to set time limits, use a timer for fun activities like video games. Then, when the buzzer rings, it is the timer that is telling your child game time is over. When your child begs for more time, you can say, "I'd like to, but the timer says time is up." For kids that have trouble with transitions, set two timers. One is a five minute warning, the second indicates that time is over. Or, say that the dishwasher needs to be emptied by 4:30pm. Then, if it's not done by that point, you can say, "I wish you had gotten your video game time tonight. Hopefully you'll get it tomorrow." This technique puts you on the same team instead of in a power struggle. It also lets kids anticipate when they will have to do things they don't like, which can help minimise their negative reaction.

DAY 9

Create a code word that signals to your child that she needs to calm down, or a private signal for children to express they are getting upset. Sometimes just the words *no* and *stop* are enough to push an emotional child over the edge. Using a code word like ‘bubble gum’ can help bring them back to reality without triggering a meltdown. It can also help explosive kids to know that even when parents are busy they are there to help. For example, if you’re on the phone and can’t respond, try using a non-verbal signal. Have your child put his hand in yours. You respond by giving it a squeeze to let him know you’ll be right with him. Then, once everyone has cooled down, you all routinely sit down and discuss what happened to trigger the behaviour, and how we can deal with it better next time. If things start to escalate again, simply say, “We’re taking a break.”

DAY 10

React swiftly. When bad behaviour starts, make it a point to respond within 10 to 15 seconds, and intervene to help them calm down. Kids with ADHD need more frequent feedback on behaviour and more frequent chances to recharge because of their short attention spans. Use the 10 and 3 rule when you need kids to behave. Children should behave well for 10 minutes, then they get a 3-minute break to reset by being physically active or having a snack.

DAY 11

Talk less and breathe more. When a child has a meltdown, don’t yell at the child about how the behaviour is wrong. Instead, focus on calming the child down and teaching him ways to calm his own tough emotions. Today, take a deep breath and tell kids you’re not in a rush, you can take the time to calm down before you keep going. Don’t try to solve the behavioural problem in the heat of the moment. Instead, focus on refusing to escalate the situation and keeping everyone safe.

You can say, “When I hear that tone, it tells me you’re anxious, and I’d like to help.”

DAY 12

Let kids know that you make the rules, and it is their decision whether to follow them. It may sound counterintuitive, but it’s OK to tell kids that they don’t have to follow your rules. Explain that the freedoms they enjoy, and the consequences they experience, are their own choices. The goal is not to punish your child so often that he stops misbehaving, but rather to encourage him to change his behaviour with consequences.

Today, when kids are disrespectful you can say, “You’re right, I’m not the boss of you. You are the boss of you, which means you are responsible for yourself. You want a lot of freedom to go on sleepovers or go shopping, but you are acting disrespectfully in this home. I don’t need you to respect me because I respect myself. But, if you continue to treat me this way, you won’t have any freedom.” Then, you can give kids 24 hours to come back with a better way to interact — this gives a specific amount of time to show a change in behaviour. If they do not, they know what to expect.

Let kids know that they can work toward better rules with good behaviour. For example, if a child is yelling because he wants a later curfew, let him know that you would expect him to, but that he won’t receive one until he can come home on time and show he is responsible. This consequence is related to the behaviour you want your child to change. Or, if your child frequently yells at mom and dad, take away a cell phone until he can go for two hours without raising his voice. This helps kids to build self control, and learn better ways to deal with frustrated feelings. If kids yell about taking something away, simply state, “I understand that you’re frustrated, but this is not going to help you get what you want.” Reiterate that your child will receive the privilege back after the time period of good behaviour, and leave it at that. Make sure you’re not taking away a privilege for so long that your child will lose interest in getting it back, or will be unable to succeed at behaving for that long. The goal is to encourage improvement, and parents need to help kids succeed.

DAY 13

Don’t let screen time be available all the time. Video games and screen time are privileges that your child should earn the right to use for behaving well. He should not have access to them all the time. They aren’t something to be taken away as a punishment, but a special treat rewarded when

DAY 14

Think about medication. When working to create the optimal conditions for their child’s success, a parent should think about accommodations at school, medication, a diet free of food sensitivities and low in sugar. When deciding how to treat symptoms, ask yourself if your child’s emotional reaction is reasonable. Or is ADHD making it impossible for her to control her emotions? Ask if she is wilfully misbehaving, or just living with a neurological short fuse. In extreme cases, behaviour problems can be treated with antipsychotic medications paired with behavioural interventions. Spend some time looking into various ways to optimise your child’s symptoms.

DAY 15

Call in the professionals. In extreme cases, you might need outside help to reset the pattern of disruptive behaviour in your home. If your child is still not seeing any improvement after two weeks, it might be time to start thinking about other options. Have your child evaluated for another mood disorder that could need additional, separate treatment. Work with a behavioural psychologist to figure out why the aggression and violent outbursts are happening.

Decreasing defiant behaviour happens by building the muscle of emotional control. While you can start to see improvement in the first 15 days, it takes time to turn the tide of an explosive household dynamic. Expect things to change over the course of three to six months. You want to see one fewer outburst or slammed door each day; don’t expect perfection. Stick with it, learn to accept your child’s and your own imperfections, and know that things will improve.

