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RAISING RESILIENT CHILDREN

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# Days

*to a*

The  
Breakthrough Program  
for Overcoming  
Your Child's  
Difficult Behavior

# Less Defiant Child

**JEFFREY BERNSTEIN, PhD**

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for Overcoming Your Child's  
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**JEFFREY BERNSTEIN, PHD**

Da Capo  
  
LIFE  
LONG

A MEMBER OF THE PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP



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## Praise for *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child*

“Dr. Bernstein has written a truly impressive book about dealing with angry, defiant children and adolescents. His astute, empathic insights about these youngsters and his practical, sensible suggestions for lessening their defiance and increasing their cooperation will be of assistance not only to parents but to teachers and mental health professionals as well. This book will serve as an invaluable resource for adults raising or working with defiant children and adolescents.”

—ROBERT BROOKS, PhD, Faculty, Harvard Medical School  
and co-author, *Raising Resilient Children*

“Here’s a unique, straightforward approach for resolving difficult behavior THAT MAKES SENSE. Dr. Bernstein shows the reader how to achieve what all parents and children *really* want—a quality, loving relationship.”

—JAMES D. SUTTON, EdD, psychologist and author of *If My Kid’s So Nice, Why’s He Driving ME Crazy?* and *101 Ways to Make Your Classroom Special*

“This readable book helps empower parents to raise cooperative and happy children. Dr. Bernstein tells parents what to do, not just what not to do. By using calm firmness and dependable discipline, parents can break the cycle that allows (or reinforces) defiance in children. Dr. Bernstein understands families and helps parents get their children moving in the right direction.”

—SAMUEL KNAPP, Director of Professional Affairs  
Pennsylvania Psychological Association

“*10 Days to a Less Defiant Child* is a must read for parents and educators alike! In short order, Dr. Bernstein has masterfully created a program which allows parents to improve family and school relationships by giving them the user friendly tools necessary to address long-term child defiance. Familial support, positive reinforcement and a team approach that includes working with school staff are the cornerstones that make this work rise to the top. Every school psychologist and every educator who deals with defiant children should have a copy of this book in their libraries!”

—IVAN J. KATZ, EdD, Superintendent of Schools  
Eldred Central School District, Eldred, New York

“What a much needed resource for parents experiencing the frustration of raising a defiant child! This book provides insights into why some children and teens reject rules and resist authority, but more importantly, provides an easy-to-implement plan to manage these negative behaviors. The information on ADHD and other disorders is particularly valuable. The sooner you get started with Dr. Bernstein’s plan, the sooner you will have a more peaceful home.”

—MARIE PAXSON, coordinator of a support group

“Parents need to go no further; this book is THE resource book for parents of defiant and challenging children. *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child* empathizes and actively supports parents like myself—who have looked fruitlessly for help—in making changes in ourselves in order to help our children live more comfortably in the world. This book should be on the shelf of every parent, mental health professional and educator. A unique approach that should become a classic!”

—JUDITH ROTH, MSW, LISW

“Defiance seems to be on the rise, but now parents have one more great resource to bring peace to their home and to their children’s lives. In *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child*, Dr. Bernstein offers practical, straightforward advice that is solidly grounded in psychological theory and practice. Parents will find something useful on every page.”

—ARI TUCKMAN, PsyD, MBA, clinical psychologist  
and co-chair of ADHDbalance.net

“Dr. Bernstein has accomplished the difficult task of writing a practical and readable book that will be a very valuable tool for parents. It is a potpourri of good ideas for intervening with a difficult child in an enthusiastic and positive way. I highly recommend this book!”

—CLARE B. JONES, PhD, Diagnostic Specialist in ADHD  
Member of National CHADD Professional Advisory Board  
and author of *Practical Suggestions for ADHD*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFFREY BERNSTEIN, PHD, is a licensed psychologist specializing in child and family therapy in the Philadelphia area. He has helped over a thousand defiant children and their families restore their relationships. A well-known relationship expert and the author of *Why Can't You Read My Mind*, Bernstein lives outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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*To my three children, Alissa, Sam, and Gabrielle—  
I love you so much. You are the source of my determination  
to put my best foot forward. I continue to grow with you as  
you continue to learn with me. You are my inspiration.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## **This Is *Not* What I Expected Parenting to Be Like**

**You knew that** parenting wouldn't be easy, but never in your wildest dreams did you think it would be this hard! You are probably reading this book because you feel exhausted and at your wit's end. Your child is defiant and he is driving you up a wall. He is colossally resistant to following even the simplest requests. He is moody, seriously stubborn, overly dramatic, rude, and disrespectful—nearly every once in a while, but quite often. He doesn't just question your authority, he actually thinks he has just as much authority as you do. Let's be clear: all parents deal with children who challenge them, but by occasionally being difficult. Defiant children, however, take the challenges to a whole new level. You've probably spent a lot of time trying to figure out what makes your child tick. Where does this intense anger come from? What caused her short fuse and vindictive attitude and behaviors? You've probably had to watch these defiant behaviors interfere with your child's learning, school adjustment, outside interests, and relationships with others. At times you may even marvel at the extent to which your child is in denial about the situation. Does he really believe that you, his teachers, and even his friends are so unfair? I'll bet you've tried countless strategies, but still the situation isn't getting better. You're burned out and you're desperate for a solution and a normal family life.

If this sounds familiar, you've come to the right place. Over the past twenty years, I have been privileged to work with more than a thousand families struggling with defiant children. In that time, I have gotten many important and valuable insights about how to help defiant children, and the distressed parents and families who walk on eggshells around them. On a personal level, I have also learned a great deal about parenting as the father of three children, ages ten, twelve, and fourteen.

I applaud you for taking the initiative to read *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child*. You will find that this book is loaded with powerful strategies and techniques that will help you significantly reduce your child's level of defiance. You will learn why defiant kids act the way they do and why defiance is so destructive to the family, and you will discover step-by-step how to reduce the defiant behavior and improve your relationship with your child. I will give you tips and exercises to help you evaluate your own behaviors and respond to your defiant child in a more constructive manner. Many of my counseling clients have accomplished these goals, and I know you can, too. Please note: My ten-day program is designed for children from ages four to eighteen. For the purposes of this text, I use the term "child" to represent this entire age group. Many examples from my psychology private practice appear in this book. All names and identifying information were changed to protect confidentiality.

## **Defiant Children Are Angry, Difficult, and Complex**

Defiant children struggle in different areas of their lives in different ways, but they all share some common characteristics—they are quick-tempered, overly dramatic, and almost constantly resistant

doing what they are asked. The biggest problem I see with defiant children is their unwillingness to accept the authority of adults. They also often behave in ways that their peers think is “weird” or “wrong.” The bottom line is that relationships are challenging for defiant children. Parents often hear angry outbursts like, “You’re not fair to me,” or “Why am I always the one you punish?” When defiance tends to rear its ugly head at home more than anywhere else, teachers may hear, “This class is stupid and boring,” or “Your tests are unfair.” Friends of defiant children may be told “You’re stupid” or asked “How come you never include me?”

A crucial part of my program is learning to understand your defiant child in a whole new way. You realize you have probably tried everything you can think of to improve your child’s difficult and problematic behaviors. This has likely included ignoring him; issuing time-outs, reward charts, and stickers (that probably ended up in the trash); and/or being either too hard or too soft in the way you discipline. None of these strategies work, because defiant children lack the emotional maturity to manage their frustration and learn from their mistakes. You need to use a different approach. Once you truly understand your child and learn not to take the things he says so personally, things will go much easier.

Defiant kids are not defiant all the time, and this can be confusing for parents. Children who struggle with defiance can be very sweet and cooperative—until they explode. In many cases, the defiant child becomes difficult at what seems like the drop of a hat. But the emotional strain parents feel from defiant children is exhausting and overwhelming.

## **A Note of Caution**

If your child has a pattern of physical aggression toward people or animals, destroys property, or has had problems breaking the law, then I advise you to seek out a trained mental health professional. These symptoms are more indicative of conduct disorder as opposed to a typical pattern of the more manageable defiant behavior. Kids with conduct disorder can be physically forceful and cruel, and in more extreme cases may even use weapons. They may destroy property by starting fires and flagrantly violate rules by doing things like running away and staying away overnight. The strategies in my program can be beneficial in such cases, but a child with problem behaviors such as these merits more attention than I can provide for you in this book.

Should your child also show signs of other psychological problems (such as depression or anxiety) that are more serious in nature, I also advise you seek out a mental health professional for his treatment. In some cases where more serious emotional distress is involved, medication may be deemed appropriate in combination with counseling. In most cases, however, the strategies in this book can complement any other interventions or approaches used to accomplish success with your child.

## **You Are Not Alone**

As a parent or caregiver for a defiant child, you *have chosen* this book for a reason—most likely because you want to restore balance and sanity to your life. Maybe you have found yourself thinking



things like the following: Isn't parenthood supposed to be about tender moments and great memories? Shouldn't all the meals I have cooked, the laundry I have folded, the clothes, toys, and activities I have paid for, the chauffeuring around town of my child and others, count for something? Why do other families seem to have it so much easier?

I understand how deeply hurt, frustrated, and confused you feel. You've been through a lot trying to figure all of this out, and you have a right to these thoughts. *But know this: you are not alone in your struggle to manage a defiant child. There are countless parents out there going through the same thing that you are, even if they appear to have a "perfect" family.*

## **Ten Life-Changing Days Lie Before You**

This ten-day program is the beginning of good things to come for you and your child. I want to stress, though, that you must continue using the strategies and principles outlined in these chapters when the ten days are over in order to lessen or end your child's defiance for good. It will certainly take more than one day for you and your child to get used to each new step and set of rules, so you must be patient and keep moving forward. My program is broken down into ten steps. At each step you will learn powerful defiance-lowering strategies that build on one another.

I will show you how to lessen your child's defiance and channel it into healthier directions. If you follow it, my ten-day plan will work for you. Just don't give up at the first signs of resistance. You will have resistance and even some setbacks, so you need to make an effort to stay positive and focused on the big picture. Keep using the strategies in this book as part of an ongoing effort and you will get the results you're looking for.

## **Step Out of Your Comfort Zone**

I know that what I'm asking you to do in this book may not be easy for you. Each day of my plan I call upon you to respond to your child in ways you may not be used to doing. I am asking you to give up your old thinking process and any patterns of overreacting. Even though you may feel that many of my suggestions require you to give up power and control, I can assure you that this is not the case. You will see by the time you complete this program that you have gained more control than you may have ever thought possible.

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## How to Get the Most from This Book

Whether or not you actually read this book in ten days, I recommend that you go through each of the ten days consecutively. It's best to read each day in the morning and then use the strategies throughout the day. You won't be able to use each and every strategy right away because I have provided a lot of them. Just keep adding new strategies on an ongoing basis after you've mastered the one(s) you are currently working on. If you choose to read this book in ten days, keep in mind that you can re-read as often as you like to further strengthen the skills you learn and try out new ones. Or, if you wish to spend a longer period of time reviewing each day and applying as many of the suggested strategies as possible before moving on to the next day, that is fine, too. Your main goal is to complete the whole program, readily apply it, and review it as needed.

Please give yourself and your child time to get used to your new approach. Sticking to the changes you make is critical. Most parents I have worked with see appreciable decreases in their child's defiant behavior within ten days, but you must remember that this is a work in progress. You've got to keep using these strategies over the long haul. These ten days are just the beginning for you. Think of it this way: The more you use my strategies the less defiant your child will be.

I recommend that you keep a log of the positive changes you see in yourself and in your child. This log does not have to be formal or elaborate. Any format that records your positive breakthroughs and successes with your child will be helpful. I wish you the best of luck on this important journey.

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## DAY 1

### Grasping Why Your Child Acts Defiant

**In order to** help your child become less defiant, you must first understand why he is acting this way. So today you will learn about the motivations behind your child's defiant behavior. You'll also discover how your parenting behaviors can affect your child's defiance—for better or worse. Parenting is not an innate set of skills that you are born with. It's a learned set of skills—and it takes even more specialized skills to guide your defiant child to a better place.

### This Is Not a Stage

There are struggles that come with any stage of childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood. But passively waiting for your child to outgrow his defiant behavior will just make the problem worse and not solve it. It's our job as parents to help our children learn appropriate behavior, not to enable poor behavior by making excuses for it. We do this by instilling solid values through role modeling, patient teaching, and leading by example. When necessary, we provide appropriate consequences to actions that, in time, will instill in the child the knowledge that he is accountable. With defiant children who tend to be more reactive and defensive, you will learn on Day 6 how to provide effective consequences to help them become more accountable. He'll understand that there is a consequence to bad behavior, whether it is cleaning up a mess he made, going on a time-out (when age appropriate), or going to bed earlier. As you will further see in Day 6, the use of consequences with defiant children requires careful consideration.

### The Roots of Defiance

*At school and with friends, Josh behaves like a perfectly normal ten-year-old boy. At home, however, it's a very different story. Josh pushes every limit possible. He often swears at his parents and harasses his siblings. Forget about asking Josh to do things around the house—he refuses to do even the most routine chores without serious resistance toward his parents. Communication between Josh and his parents consists of a series of arguments, leaving them all exhausted, angry, and tense.*

*Though their marriage was solid for several years, Josh's parents have recently begun to fight with each other about their son, each blaming the other for his abrasive behavior. They are sick of hearing advice from well-meaning friends, who are sure all Josh needs is a firm*

hand to “set him straight.”

~~“Jessica looks at me like she hates me,” said Jessica’s very distressed, single mother. While she was a solid student up through sixth grade, fourteen-year-old Jessica, now in eighth grade, was really giving her mother a hard time. Jessica hounded her mother over and over to let her be taken to see her boyfriend. She told her mother she would make her life miserable unless her mother complied.~~

When Jessica and her mother came to me, they shared stories of ugly arguments and they exhibited high levels of hostility toward each other. Jessica’s teachers also noticed a growing defiant edge to her personality. Jessica had begun skipping classes and refusing to comply with schoolwork expectations from her teachers.

The stories above are typical examples of why parents bring their children to see me. A blow-up occurs at home (usually just one of many such meltdowns), and the parents decide it’s time to get help.

No one can say for sure what causes defiant behavior in children. It may be inherited through genes. Defiant behavior patterns may be caused by problems in brain chemistry. How a family reacts to a child’s behavior and how a child is disciplined also play a big role in the development of defiant behaviors. The truth is that many children, especially when they are tired, hungry, or upset, tend to disobey, argue, and defy authority.

As they grow up, most children mature and learn socially appropriate ways to get what they want. Defiant children, however, adopt and follow inappropriate methods, becoming demanding, oppositional, and difficult. Underlying influences driving oppositional behavior may be feelings of inadequacy due to concerns such as:

- Rejection by one’s peers
- Learning problems
- Problems relating to a parent(s)
- Traumas, such as sexual abuse
- Body image concerns
- Sibling conflicts
- The perception that defiance is “cool”

Whatever the roots, the destructiveness and disagreeableness of defiant children is purposeful. This is not a phase. This problem will not just go away overnight. Your defiant child is trying to antagonize you. She’s not doing it because she’s evil, although at times you may wonder if she is. Your child acts this way because she doesn’t know how else to handle her difficult thoughts and feelings. This is the key to understanding why your child is being defiant, and it is crucial that you keep it in mind as you’re dealing with her.

As you’re probably well aware, conventional discipline strategies usually fail when applied to defiant children. Defiant children may refuse to go on a time-out from an early age, and claim not to care about losing privileges. This sets the tone for ever increasing frustration and conflicts between the child and his parents. When adults resort to spanking, defiant children are often able to manipulate the situation and turn the focus on the parents’ behavior. They will say things like “I’ll report you for child abuse” to avoid facing responsibility for their own transgressions. As crazy as this may sound, defiant children actually believe they are equal to adults. Many exasperated parents have told me how they tried to shut their defiant child in her bedroom only to have her destroy her own belongings and escape out the window.

# Your Child May Have Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

All kids display defiant behavior from time to time, but it's possible that your child has a condition called Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). ODD symptoms include chronic anger, blaming others for mistakes, being touchy, or easily annoyed and vindictive. To qualify for an ODD diagnosis, your child must do things like talk back, refuse to do chores, use bad language, and say things like "You can't make me" or "You're never fair" nearly every day for at least six months. In other words, kids with ODD have oppositional attitudes and behaviors that are more of a pattern than an exception to the rule. Here is a list of behaviors that a child diagnosed with ODD would exhibit:

- Often loses his temper
- Often argues with adults
- Often actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules
- Often deliberately annoys people
- Often blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior
- Is often touchy or easily annoyed by others
- Is often angry and resentful
- Is often spiteful or vindictive

Don't be intimidated by the term ODD, which often sounds very ominous and clinical to parents. It's important to realize that even if your child displays only one or two behaviors on the list above, these behaviors are not that frequent, you still need to learn how to keep the situation from getting worse. The expression "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" could not be more relevant than when parenting defiant children. I have counseled many children who met the ODD diagnostic criteria, and I have also worked with lots of defiant children who fall short of meeting the criteria. A child—with any level of defiance—can create big problems for himself, his family, and others around him. The strategies in this book will work for all defiant children, whether or not they have ODD. Whatever level of defiance you are dealing with will lessen considerably if you follow my ten-day plan, which is based on what I do with defiant children and their families who come to my office. To keep things clear, from this point on I will use the term "defiant child" to encompass both those kids with ODD and those who are defiant but don't meet the criteria for ODD.

## **How Defiant Is My Child?**

The list below describes eight aspects of defiant behavior. To help get a handle on exactly how defiant your child really is, think about which of the defiant behaviors that I've listed occur in your child, and the degree of impact they have. Using the spaces next to each sentence, rate the impact of your child's behaviors from 1 (most problematic) to 5 (least problematic).

- \_\_\_\_\_ My child often loses his temper.
- \_\_\_\_\_ My child often argues with adults.
- \_\_\_\_\_ My child defies or refuses to follow an adult's requests or rules.
- \_\_\_\_\_ My child deliberately annoys people.

\_\_\_\_\_ My child blames others for his or her behavior.

\_\_\_\_\_ My child is touchy and easily annoyed by others

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\_\_\_\_\_ My child is angry and resentful.

\_\_\_\_\_ My child is spiteful or vindictive.

Look carefully at how you rated your child's behaviors. It should be clear which defiant behaviors present the biggest problems for you. Now, ask yourself the following questions:

- When did these behaviors start?
- In what setting(s) do they occur?
- Are there negative events in my child's past that could be influencing these behaviors?
- What, if anything, has helped me manage any of these behaviors in the past?
- How have I tended to respond to these behaviors?

Don't worry if you can't answer all these questions yet. Your goal for right now is to start thinking about your child's challenges and how to approach them.

## You Are Not Alone

Most parents with defiant children feel extremely isolated, as if they were the only ones in the world dealing with this problem. I can assure you that you are not alone. Sadly, our society is filled with images of "perfect parents" and "perfect families." Unfortunately, many of these "perfect parents" end up in my office in a panic when they realize that their "perfect" child is no longer manageable. As I tell all my clients, no one on this earth is perfect. Looks are deceiving, and you can't compare your family to other families or you will drive yourself nuts.

Most people don't know anything about defiant kids until they have one. The mother of a twelve-year-old boy I worked with shared with me the following:

*A few years ago I saw a mother and her son arguing outside a church. The boy made it clear to his mother that he was not going in for the service. I was appalled to see that this boy ended up sitting outside in the lobby and that his parents took turns watching him. I looked at my four-year-old son and felt grateful that he would never be like that boy out in the lobby. Well, I was more surprised than you can imagine when I found myself going through the same thing and many other battles at home once my little angel turned eleven. I never would have guessed my child would become so difficult and defiant!"*

I have seen defiant children come from both intact homes and broken homes. Some defiant children have been star athletes, musical virtuosos, and even honor students. Of course, many of the defiant children I have seen have struggled with school grades, friends, and family relationships. The point here is that there is no one family mold or background circumstance that fosters defiant children. Defiant children are found in families of all income levels and walks of life. As a society, we have a huge need for the tools and strategies to guide and help them.

# How Does Your Defiant Child Affect You?

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How much distress is your child's problems causing you and other members of your family? As a parent of a defiant child, you have probably experienced some or all of the feelings listed below. Put a check next to any that you can identify with.

- You question why you had children in the first place.
- You resent how your defiant child has drained you and the rest of the family.
- You feel desperately overwhelmed trying to keep up with all of life demands.
- You feel nothing is going to help your situation.
- You feel exhausted.
- You feel manipulated.
- You feel sad that your marriage has lost its passion.
- You feel guilty.
- You feel like a horrible failure as a parent.

This list is not exhaustive. As I discuss in the next chapter, parents wrestle with these views and even extremely negative thoughts (I call them "toxic thoughts") about their defiant children. For now, you need to stop comparing yourself to other parents. As "golden" as their family life and children may seem, trust me—that is not the case behind closed doors. Every family has problems, and the best thing you can do for yourself and your family is to accept the situation you've found yourself in. Your child is temperamental, overly reactive, demanding, and draining. Whether you want to blame her DNA, past life events, your parenting, or the family history, this is how your child is. *But* by accepting your situation and seeking help as you're doing now, you've put your entire family on the track back to happiness and peaceful coexistence.

## Making Changes

Now that you have a better understanding of what defiant behavior is and how it applies to your child, you know that you need to make some changes and get control. The first step to gaining control is taking inventory of yourself as a parent.

Like all parents, you have made your fair share of mistakes. The notion that parents are to blame for their child's defiant behavior is often reinforced by the fact that some defiant kids are model citizens away from home. Many defiant kids, though not all, get good grades at school, cooperate with coaches, and are polite to their friends' parents. Some are even able to convince therapists that their problems are caused entirely by their parents. I have certainly heard my fair share of creative, embellished stories from defiant kids during therapy.

## Identifying Your Positive Parenting Behaviors

To help you stop blaming yourself and gain a sense of control, let's start with the positives. Read the list below and check off what you have done well as a parent.

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- Smiles
- Winks
- Pats
- Stand close
- Say "I love you."
- Eye contact
- Hugs
- Nods
- Shake hands
- Attend school conferences
- Give praise
- Give compliments
- Drive to lessons
- Give rewards
- Arrange birthday parties
- Drive to activities

Give yourself a pat on the back for doing any of the above behaviors. Your child deeply appreciates them, even if he doesn't admit it.

If you feel that you have not exhibited the above behaviors enough, then there is no better time than now to start. Some may be more consistent with your personality than others. For example, perhaps you are not an overly demonstrative person and you don't feel very comfortable with hugs. In that case, use verbal praise instead.

Practicing these positive parenting behaviors helps set the stage for connecting with and understanding your child, which is one of the key factors in resolving your child's defiant behavior. We will discuss this in detail on Day 2.

## **Identifying Your Negative Parenting Behaviors**

Now let's talk about your negative parenting behaviors. Read the list below and check off the negative parenting behaviors you have exhibited.

- Yelling
- Sarcasm
- Teasing
- Hitting
- Ignoring
- Lecturing
- Shaming
- Criticizing
- Provoking



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