

Non-Compliance

Is your child disobedient?



Is your child:

- Not doing what you say?
- Acting defiant?
- Forgetting directions?
- Saying, "I didn't hear you?"
- Making excuses for not getting things done?
- Appearing unable to follow through with tasks you assign?
- Huffing and puffing around when asked to do a small chore?
- Not listening to the teacher or other adult?

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Some children do not follow directions. You may say "get up and get dressed." Twenty minutes later, you re-enter the bedroom to find your child wearing one sock and his underwear, staring out the bedroom window. Sometimes, distractions can be a huge factor in following directions. Other times, children may not be able to shift attention

from a preferred task to a non-preferred task very easily. The computer or TV can be *reinforcing* to a child, which means that it may capture his or her interest. Your child may struggle to shift to doing something that is not fun, like making the bed or putting away laundry. You may ask 3 times for your child to complete a chore and get an “okay” followed by continued hyper-focus on finishing that level of his video game. After touching your child on the arm, he may say, “I didn’t hear you! You never told me!” Other children may simply declare, “I don’t want to” and proceed to have a temper tantrum. Often, you may feel it was not worth it to ask for that chore to be completed in the first place. You may be surprised that your previously compliant child yells ‘NO’ in your face and wanders off to do his own thing. As a parent you may be scratching your head about where you went wrong.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

Underlying problems for non-compliance could be comprehension, inattention or impulsivity, autism, behavior disorder, or emotional symptoms. It also may be a sign of a gifted profile.

Gifted children often reject direction from authority and have somewhat of a non-conforming nature. In this case, it is important for parents to be more explicit about the rules and the rationale behind each rule. If you are consistent and persistent as a parent, you are doing your job. Do not expect immediate change, but rather expect for your child to learn accountability and to have gradually increasing responsibility. If, however, the behaviors do not gradually improve, it is time to look more closely at other potential issues or disabilities that may be getting in the way of your child’s behavior.

Comprehension: Another consideration when your child is not following directions is comprehension. Make sure your child knows what you are asking him or her to do. Have your child repeat back what he will do first. As soon as he does it, provide praise, and give the next direction. Do not assume your child is refusing to follow directions until you ensure your instructions are clear and easy to follow.

ADHD: A child with ADHD often has challenges with attention, planning, organizing and impulsivity. Sometimes children with ADHD have difficulty focusing long enough to digest the information, and with planning and organizing their time to get tasks completed.

Impulsivity means acting without thinking; an impulsive child may somewhat unintentionally pick up that hand-held video game from the floor instead of a pair of socks. Ten minutes later, you are late, and your child is not wearing socks.

Autism: Rigidity and challenges with change in routine can be related to autism. Often, children with ASD prefer to do things their own way because of poor perspective taking, adherence to routines, repetitive behaviors, and non-functional rituals. Your child may not follow rules because he does not take the parent’s perspective to see the importance of the task.

A child with ASD could also prefer to repetitively line up cars in his room rather than be interrupted to get dressed. Your child may insist that he 'has to' get dressed after he eats breakfast and so it would be impossible for him to get dressed right now. Shifting attention, moving from one task to another, can also be hard for kids on the Spectrum.

Mood: Children with mood challenges like bipolar may have low self-esteem and seem very rigid. These kids might not follow directions because they don't want to fail or make mistakes. These children are likely to yell, refuse and throw a tantrum.

Other emotional symptoms may be relevant. Emotional instability and inattention introduce the possibility that a child is depressed or experiencing something traumatic. It will be important to consider diagnoses like bipolar, depression and PTSD in this case.

Behavior Disorder: Non-compliance may be a sign of a behavior disorder, which would be a consistent pattern of refusing to follow adult direction and disrespectful behavior. Children who yell 'no!', call you names, deliberately thwart your authority, or break rules are showing signs of a behavior disorder. In this case, you should consult with a psychologist who may refer you for Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy. A consultation with the school may also be necessary to nurture positive behavior and to reverse any poor behavior habits.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS DISOBEDIENT

If you are concerned about your child's disobedience, take these few steps. First, make interactions with your child as pleasant and positive as possible. Only give an instruction you are prepared to enforce. If you are tired and don't feel like a battle, don't ask. Provide directions or instructions that your child is likely to follow.

As you increase the expectations, break things into manageable steps, one at a time, such as saying, "please get the sheets from the laundry" rather than, "fold the laundry and put it away."

Provide motivating rewards for completion of tasks. Play a game as a family, have ice cream, earn a weekly trip to a dollar store, thrift shop, or shop the dollar bin at your local grocery store. If your child does not comply, do not provide the reward. However, make sure there are other times to try to earn rewards.

If a tantrum ensues, stay close by, remove attention and wait to see a behavior you like. Model calm behavior and avoid any arguments when your child is upset. Stay firm, calm, and consistent.

No matter what happens, always have some fun, relaxed, noncritical time together each day, even if this time is just 10 minutes to read a book. If you are still concerned about extreme or dangerous behavior, consult with an Applied Behavior Analyst right away (see Where to go for help section).

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Shifting or sustaining attention \(Focusing\)](#): difficulty with attention or distractibility will often lead to challenges following directions
- [Perseverating](#): challenges changing tasks due to excessive focus on a certain topic can impact a child's ability to follow directions
- [Depression](#): underlying feelings of depression can cause a child to be forgetful or distracted which may result in non-compliance
- [Attachment](#): a history of abuse or exposure to inappropriate behavior may cause a child to be spacey, disconnected, or angry, which may lead to non-compliance
- [Conduct problems](#): deliberate avoidance or rule breaking may be at the root of the non-compliance
- [Verbal comprehension](#): misunderstanding of directions may lead to non-compliance. It is important to make sure your child understands the instructions he is expected to follow. If it appears your child is not comprehending instructions, the following articles may help: [Receptive language](#), [Following directions](#), [Verbal comprehension](#)

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#): restricted interests or behaviors and poor social engagement. Some children with autism have difficulty sustaining attention which can lead to non-compliance
- [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#): challenges with sustaining attention, distractibility, impulsivity, or slow processing speed that all impact following directions
- [Behavior Disorders](#): behavioral disorders that are created by accidental reinforcement of bad behaviors. Children with behavior disorders may be non-compliant because they get their way when they are not following directions
- [Trauma and Attachment Disorders](#): excessive stress that stems from exposure to abuse or trauma; stress can impact our ability to focus and attend to directions. Often, children with trauma or neglect histories are angry and non-compliant with authority figures and rules
- [Depression](#): depressed mood or, in children, irritability that is pervasive; decreased interest in activities that used to be enjoyable. Children who are apathetic and checked-out emotionally are less likely to comply with directions

- [Bipolar Disorder](#): depressed mood, or in children, irritability that is pervasive; alternating with periods of elevated mood, pressured speech and goal-directed activity. Children with bipolar disorder tend to be impulsive which can lead to non-compliance
- [Gifted](#): giftedness is not considered a disability but many gifted kids have specific social-emotional needs that require additional support. Children who are gifted tend to resist authority and may be non-compliant

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a **customized profile** of concerns for your child or to **consult 'live'** with a psychologist
- [Psychotherapist or Play Therapist](#): to treat emotional symptoms and help with social skills training, planning and organization
- [ABA Therapist](#): to treat behavior; or to conduct an analytical Functional Analysis of the behavior that can help guide treatment
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider a full assessment to look at symptoms in mental health and/or behavioral context
- [Psychiatrist](#): to prescribe and manage psychotropic medication for inattention, impulsivity; stimulant medication for ADHD is effective in a high percentage of children with focus and impulsivity challenges

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [Roberts, BASC-3, Clinical Interview, RCMAS, CDI-2, Human Figure Drawing, PTSD Scale, Rorschach, Brief Projective Measures](#): emotional assessment (Neuropsychological or psychological evaluation)
- [WISC-V](#): cognitive assessment (Psychological or School Psychological evaluation)
- [TOL-2, CTMT, WCST, TOVA](#): attention and executive functioning assessment (Neuropsychological evaluation)
- [ADOS-2](#): social communication assessment

LEARN MORE

[1] Barkley, Russell A. (2013). *Taking charge of ADHD, 3rd edition: The complete, authoritative guide for parents.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Taking-Charge-ADHD-Third-Authoritative/dp/1462507891/>

[2] Durand, V. Mark & Hieneman, Meme (2008). *Helping Parents with Challenging Children Positive Family Intervention Facilitator Guide (Programs That Work).*

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[3] Greene, Ross W. (2001). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Explosive-Child-Understanding-Frustrated-Chronically/dp/0060931027/>

[4] Kroncke, Anna P., & Willard, Marcy & Huckabee, Helena (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings.* Springer, San Francisco.

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[5] Purvis, Karyn B., & Cross, David R., & Sunshine, Wendy Lyons (2007). *The connected child: Bring hope and healing to your adoptive family.*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Connected-Child-healing-adoptive-family/dp/0071475001?ie=UTF8&hvadid=3523655623&hvbm=be&hvdev=c&hvqmt=e&ref=pd_sl_92tq5iccf1_e&tag=mh0b-20

[6] Seigel, Daniel J. & Bryson, Tina Payne (2014). *No drama-discipline: The whole-brain way to calm the chaos and nurture your child's developing mind.*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/No-Drama-Discipline-Whole-Brain-Nurture-Developing/dp/0345548043?ie=UTF8&hvadid=4162156440&hvbm=be&hvdev=c&hvqmt=e&ref=pd_sl_3tktpckj2d_e&tag=mh0b-20

[7] Siegel, Daniel J. & Bryson, Tina Payne (2012). *The whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture your Child's Developing Mind.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Whole-Brain-Child-Revolutionary-Strategies-Developing/dp/0553386697/>

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