

Defusing Your Child's Opposition With Paradox

The use of paradox is a great way to defuse kids' oppositionality. It works best with younger kids, especially 3-6 year olds, but can be used effectively with kids even older.

Because kids acting or feeling oppositional feel the need to be challenging, paradoxical language is just what the doctor ordered: It allows them to indulge their stubbornness even as they meet your request! Talk about a win-win!

Jimmy Refusing to Clean-Up a Spill

Let's look at the case of a child, Jimmy, 5, who refuses to clean-up a spill. Note the contrasting approaches his mother takes in her efforts to compel his cooperation.

Non-Paradox (*said with annoyance after two previous requests*): I said clean-up that spill, Jimmie. I'm not kidding. Last warning.

Using Paradox (*said playfully, with gleam in her eye*): You know what, Jimmie, don't clean up that spill. Whatever you do, do not clean-up that spill right now, really well. You wouldn't want to clean up that spill right now, really well. I know you won't.

Playfully tell an oppositional child *not* to do something, or that s(he) *won't* do something, and well, guess what? S(he) just might enjoy proving you wrong. Now you could say, aren't I reinforcing my child's oppositional behavior by *using her oppositionality* to produce the requested response?

In a sense, yes; but in my experience, as long as the child senses the playful tone of the exchange, the risk of truly reinforcing his oppositionality is minimal. Instead, the paradoxical challenge enables him simultaneously to perform cooperatively (without feeling defeated!) *and please you*. This indirectly encourages future cooperative responses.

Assuming Jimmie bites on this approach, you can follow-up with more paradox to excellent effect. You can say, for instance, with a wry smile, pretending sternness and dissatisfaction, while tousling his hair:

"I told you not to clean up that mess. You're gonna be in big trouble, buddy. You were not supposed to do such a good job, and you did it anyway. You rascal. What am I gonna do with you?"

The playful element is apparent, and the paradox has allowed him to *feel* oppositional and uncooperative, while actually *being* responsive and agreeable. It has defused (for him) the problem of his cooperation: he can feel *safe* to enjoy your satisfaction with him, and *you* feel delighted.

Siblings Squabbling

Here's a use of paradox with siblings who are driving you crazy with their fighting. Again, one could intervene in a more traditionally warning manner, as reflected in the first example; or more creatively (and perhaps effectively) with the second, paradoxical approach.

Non-Paradox: STOP FIGHTING, DAMMIT, or you're *both* gonna be in big trouble!" (*Note that your systolic blood pressure will have risen to 180 and left your kids giggling nervously.*)

Use of Paradox: You know what, kids, I really don't think it's possible for the two of you to stop fighting for the next five minutes. And if you were to do that, I mean really get along for the next five minutes, I might have to think about surprising you guys with something later. But I really doubt you can get along for the next five minutes. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you'll stun me, and somehow manage to do it.

Remember, kids love to play games; even *non*-oppositional kids seek opportunities to prove you wrong, show you that they can do something that you tell them they won't do. Notice, too, the challenge for peace for *five* minutes. Five minutes isn't too long, and can easily be made into ten, by tacking on another five; but *ten* minutes from the start might be stretching it. So you ask for something small initially, and go from there.

As in the first example, you can follow-up the kids' initial success with more paradox, for instance:

"I must admit I'm pretty amazed at how civil you guys are being with each other. This is very interesting. But I'm sure, absolutely certain, there's just no way that you can do this for another five minutes. No way. That would almost be like a world record. No...there's no way."

This kind of playful paradox gives your kids the chance to wield an "I'll show you" attitude while at the same time pleasing and impressing you.

I encourage you to practice and experiment creatively with paradoxical language. In its capacity to bypass *and* respect the child's tenacious need for control, paradox can elicit cooperative behaviors that are surprising, not infrequently dramatic, and certainly gratifying for all.