

OPPOSITIONAL & DEFIANT BEHAVIOR

The issue of personal control in the living experience is significant. Self-esteem, status and sense of well-being are contingent upon the belief that staff are in control. When circumstances occur in which a staff's sense of control is threatened or significantly decreased, a personal power vacuum is experienced. This feeling of powerlessness often results in compensating behavior directed at regaining his/her sense of personal control. The experience of "power loss" most often occurs during times of transition when life is uncertain. Sometimes these feelings occur when the living environment changes. This feeling also occurs when the people most immediate in one's life experience change (death, divorce, etc). Some people become adept at living with the uncertainty of transition and some do not. For children and adolescents, times of transition can be traumatic. Those who are unable to adjust often engage in compensating behavior patterns that can be classified as oppositional and defiant. This pattern is very much related to their sense of powerlessness. It is a compensation by which they seek to relieve their uneasy feelings.

Individuals who exhibit this pattern of oppositional and defiant behavior present a most difficult challenge to staff. The difficulty presented by such behavior has to do with staff's perception that their personal authority is being challenged. In fact, this perception is often correct. For the staff in charge, how they react to oppositional and defiant behavior is a critical issue for both the immediate and the long-range situation. These non-compliant behaviors must be perceived as "invitations" to engage in a professional manner. When the staff accepts the behavior as a professional response issue, the outcome can be positive. However, staff often feel the dent in their authority armor and respond with power asserting behavior that can quickly become fuel for a conflict. By responding in this manner, the staff is joining the individual in a power and control game in which there are no winners.

Oppositional and defiant behaviors are poorly camouflaged relationship traps set by individuals. They are caught in a struggle with themselves and their life experience. Because they are feeling impotent in dealing with their perceived trouble, they invite staff to join them by attempting to assert some type of control over the staff. Avoiding these traps can be significant for the staff. In the article "*The control game: Exploring oppositional behavior*", Mary Beth Hewett, identifies several examples of oppositional behavior commonly seen in organizations. They are: (1) making deals, (2) need to have the last word, (3) blatant rule violation, (4) constantly questioning "Why?" (5) playing one staff against the other, (6) refusal to comply and (7) loopholes.

Every social service worker and educator has, at some time, run into the above indicated behaviors when dealing with individuals. Some suggested responses are as follows:

Making deals:

This is behavior that is a soft "either/or". For example, the staff makes a statement of behavioral expectation – "You need to clean up before going out" and the individual responds with "I'll clean up twice as good later if I can go out now." What he/she is really saying is if staff makes this deal now, I will comply later. If staff doesn't, then he/she risks having a conflict over it. In short, "either let me have my wish, or I'll force you into a situation that you don't want." Fundamentally, the deal seeking individual wants to have a sense of control in the situation. Staff can sometimes achieve compliance by pointing out the control issues at stake. For example, "I know you want to feel like you have options and control over what you experience. No one can force you to do what you don't want to do. It's your choice, don't do you chores and don't go out. It's up to you." For other individuals, it may simply be an issue of not wanting to be told what they can or cannot do. Staff can lessen this feeling by asking rather than telling the individual what to do. Making deals around rules and expectations can undermine personal and program authority. When staff find themselves giving into such requests, they should examine the rationale for the rule and their commitment to the rule. When rules do not make sense they cause frequent problems.

Needing to have the last word:

This oppositional behavior is motivated by the need to keep the present conversation going so that a sense of control is maintained. In short, as long as the discussion is open, the individual has a chance to win. Unfortunately, most human beings are very susceptible to this need to have the last word. As such, staff very often fall for this trap and respond with their "last word," which of course only continues to fuel the conversation. If staff can simply decide to allow the individual to have the last word, then they can end the situation on a positive note. Even the "parting shot" can be ignored in the immediate moment and reaction given at a later time. Last word conversations are simply one person saying "...and remember I'm in charge," and the other person saying, "No you're not, I am" and so on, and so on. Success requires staff to engage in an internal conversation that reaffirms their own sense of being in control.

Blatant rule violation:

When an individual breaks a known rule right in front of staff's nose, he/she is saying, "Come and get me." This is an invitation to engage in a power struggle over the rule. Again, he/she is challenging authority. When rule violation is blatant, it is usually an attempt by the individual to gain a sense of control. "Look what I can do, you can't stop me." The decision to deal with the rule violation is contingent upon a variety of issues. When the violation is not a threat to safety, the option of ignoring it may be available to staff. It is sometimes best to ignore minor rule violations in order to avoid a large-scale confrontation or power struggle. Staff can react to the violation with consequences at a later time. This planned ignoring technique should only be used with low-level behaviors. Another reaction might be the use of positive correction when the staff reminds the individual of previous correct behavior prior to correcting the existing violation. The use of consequence reminders is another option.

Constantly questioning "Why?":

Oppositional individuals often want to know the rationale for rules and directions. They question "why" to almost any directive. This need is a way of challenging authority and controlling discussions. When staff are questioned this way they experience an authority challenge and the frustration of questions being raised to matters in which the answers are obvious. The instinctive inclination of the staff to reaffirm their authority can lead to less than professional responses. For legitimate "Why?" questions the rationale should be given. Ideally, this occurs when important rules are first introduced to the individual. When the "why" questions are simply a function of power gamesmanship, the staff may want to invite individuals to a clarification session during a time when it is not convenient for them – such as when their favorite TV show is airing. The inconvenience can quickly melt the interest they have in the question.

Playing one staff against another:

"Mrs. Smith doesn't do it that way," is often heard from individuals. It is purposively attacking staff's inconsistencies to avoid being responsible to a rule or directive. Individuals in care have an uncanny ability to spot inconsistencies. They often use this as an excuse for avoiding behavioral expectations. They rationalize that if staff are not consistent with their expectations then it is ok for them to act irresponsibly around those expectations. The truth is, staff are not always consistent, but that has little to do with their choice to avoid their responsibility. A simple confrontation of this manipulation is usually the most efficient response. It is, of course, better for staff to be consistent in their expectations, but inconsistencies do occur.

Refusal to comply:

This is the "You can't make me" response to staff directives. The answer is that they are correct - staff cannot make them, only they can decide. Staff can respond by agreeing and pointing out how they hope the individual makes a good decision and why. Also, it is good to understand asking individuals for compliance is different than directing them to comply. The former provides an opportunity for choice and often results in less opposition because it allows the individual to experience the power of choice.

Loopholes:

This refers to the individual who follows the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law. For example, when told to "remove the head band", the individual responds by removing the headband and then minutes later puts it back on her head. Sometimes more specific language can resolve the loophole but more often than not the individual simply opts for another loophole. The problem here, as with many of these examples, is that the individual is asserting personal power by crossing the line in the sand that has been drawn by the establishment of a rule or behavioral expectation. Sometimes attending to the process of how rules and expectations are established can diminish this type of behavior. Arbitrary rules and expectations are an invitation for rule violation. When staff do not involve the individual in question in the process of expectation setting they are asking to spend significant time chasing violators. Achieving some consensus around rules and behavioral expectations up front makes more sense. As staff engage the individual in this process, it is best to explain the difference between the "letter" and the "spirit" of the rules.

Finally, staff must remember that oppositional behavior is age appropriate for the pre-adolescent and adolescent age group. These life stages are times for testing as individuals struggle to define themselves. When working with these groups, opposition and defiance must be expected.