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***What Parents Need  
to Know About  
ODD***

(revised)

Up-to-date insights  
and ideas for managing  
Oppositional Defiant Disorder  
and other defiant behaviors

James D. Sutton, EdD

# **What Parents Need to Know About ODD (revised)**

**by James D. Sutton, EdD**

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## PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **An Honor and an Opportunity**

I consider it an honor and an opportunity to share with you my experiences and thoughts on oppositional and defiant behaviors in children and adolescents—behaviors sometimes classified or diagnosed as a condition called Oppositional Defiant Disorder. I’ve enjoyed (*most* of the time) a career-long study in child and adolescent behavior, a venture I have found fascinating and ever-evolving.

This book grew from the original audio CD (with manual) program for parents, *What Parents Need to Know About ODD*, published in 2003. Although many parents benefited from the ability to listen to this program in the car or while doing other things, some folks desired a more traditional format. This book is a revision into text of that popular program, with the added benefit of three more years of experience and access to even more information and interventions. This has expanded the original work substantially, as well as the references from which it was drawn.

I’m clear on the fact that parents don’t pick up a book like this for casual reading. Rather, they would be searching (sometimes *desperately* searching) for ideas, insights and interventions regarding the behavior of a youngster, most likely a very specific youngster. Well, if you’re one of those folks, you are in the right place. I have been blessed over the years with the opportunity to study, write and exchange with other specialists insights and ideas that really work. You will find here the solid experience of folks who truly have “been there; done that.”

So, if you’re ready to begin, let’s get started.

## Industrial-strength Difficulty

Well-meaning friends and family of parents of oppositional and defiant children are often full of great advice—especially when they’re not having to raise one of these kids in *their* house. You may have already discovered that not only are there times when this advice does not work, following it can sometimes make things *worse*. I know; I get plenty of e-mails from parents, grandparents and other family members who are frustrated, stressed-out and on the verge of giving up. Here are some actual comments I have received.

**A mother of an eight-year-old writes-** “My son is so angry and defiant. I never know what is going to set him off. I am *totally* exhausted.”

**A child’s aunt writes-** “My sister is now *past* her breaking point.”

**A grandmother simply writes-** “*Where* do we turn for help?”

**A mother of an adolescent writes-** “I love him with all my heart. However, his behavior is tearing apart our family of five.”

**A teacher writes-** “My students are diagnosed with behavioral disorders; I know how to work with them. But with my own son, I don’t have a clue.”

Although it is true that oppositional and defiant youngsters and their parents can become loaded down with heavy doses of grief and frustration, I believe it is also true that, for the most part, it doesn’t *have* to be that way. It certainly doesn’t have to stay that way. There *is* hope for change.

## Two Bedrock Points

In a moment, I going to show you, right here at the very beginning of this book, the results toward which we'll be working—results of not only improved behavior, but of a happier, more goal-directed child. First, I must make two points very clear. They are the bedrock, the foundation, of everything you will read here.

**Point #1: *With just a few exceptions, we're talking about good kids.*** Although they will frustrate, pester and annoy others, most youngsters are not into schemes and plans for *hurting* people. As inappropriate as their behavior can be at times, these kids usually know *how* to behave.

In certain situations, and with certain people, they behave quite well. Have you ever sent your child off to camp for a week, or with the neighbors on a weekend outing, only to hear that his behavior was *perfect*? Ever have someone come up and tell you she met your child in public, adding, “What a delightful young man (or young lady).” Of course you were thinking, “Yeah, but you should try *living* with him!”

By contrast, have you ever wondered why one teacher tells you how much trouble they're having with your child, yet another teacher down the hall sings your kid's praises? Ever wonder why this happens, this junior version of Jekyll and Hyde right under your own roof? (It actually happens quite often.) As we will see, this discrepancy in behavior actually contains part of the solution for dealing with it.

**Point #2: *We will never change another person's behavior until we first change our own.*** Period. Threats only work when one can apply enough force to make good the threat. Rewards only work when the size of the reward is greater

than the kicks a youngster gets out of frustrating authority. At best, threats and rewards (and other measures we will discuss) are temporary. At worse, they can actually *fuel* the problem.

## **Real Change**

I will stake my reputation and over 30 years of experience on this: ***Real change occurs when relationships improve.*** Read this sentence again and consider what could happen if it were earnestly and profoundly applied. It continues to be true that lasting change *only* happens when problems are honestly and squarely addressed. The relationship between an adult and an oppositional and defiant child only changes when one of them takes the initiative to make it happen. Since adults *ought* to be more mature, insightful and solution-driven than children, this means the adult—YOU.

You will encounter some adults who will put the whole burden of change on the child. Although that's one way to look at the problem, it's also one way to keep the problem alive and well.

## **Potential Changes to Look for in Your Child**

If you complete this book and earnestly begin to apply what you have learned, you should realize some, if not most, of the following changes in your child:

- 1. A growing awareness of the benefits of positive change.**
- 2. More appropriate responses to reasonable requests and confrontation.**

- 3. Less misunderstanding and resistance.**
- 4. The ability to make better choices and assume responsibility for them.**
- 5. The ability to appropriately monitor, evaluate and change their behaviors for the better own their own.**
- 6. Better grades in school with less strife and trouble.**
- 7. A happier son or daughter who is more invested into genuine and loving relationships.**

