



Difficult Personality Traits, part 3 of 5—

Defiantly Different

by Sandy Friesen, Managing Editor, Christian School Services

Leah is so negative," lamented the teacher. "Regardless of the project, she refuses to cooperate. The more I insist, the more stubborn she becomes. And if I ignore her, she persists in taking control of the activity. It's almost like she defines herself through what she won't do rather than what she will do." The teacher has just described the *defiant child*.

Yet when the teacher stands back and tries to look at Leah objectively, she has to admit that Leah is also very clever. She is well organized with the plans she develops. She is also methodical, deliberate, and can quickly grasp the big picture and develop strategies to succeed.

With that in mind, the teacher decided to develop her own plan. The first step was to decide what exactly was the problem. Dr. Stanley Greenspan's book *The Challenging Child* describes the problem for defiant children as:

- They are easily overwhelmed.
- They have a strong need to be in control.
- Saying "No" gives them a sense of control.
- When they're overloaded, using organizational skills to accept only what they think they can handle gives them a sense of control.

So, how does the defiant child feel? He may feel that others are asking too much too quickly. Perhaps he is overwhelmed with

the sense that if he does not take control, someone else will control him. And, that the world needs to be restricted, not expanded.

Defiant people can be difficult to have around. Some studies have called them "mismatchers"—people who tend to have "a better way" or see the flaw in our ideas. It's easy to react negatively to these people, but as adults and as godly leaders, our goal should be to help these children interact with others without controlling them. It is also important to help children to feel secure, like they can trust the person who



is overseeing them. It is also in their best interest if we can get them to try new experiences. If these children can learn to reflect and learn about their motivations and behaviors, they may be likely to develop strategies that comfort themselves besides anger and defiance.

Unfortunately, we as teachers and/or parents may operate from a limited repertoire of strategies

of how to deal with these children. We may find ourselves being intrusive and imposing our agendas. We may over-stimulate them with our energy or desire to complete a task and forget the goal of the task. Sometimes we take their defiance personally and decide that they are out to get us, and sometimes we're afraid of them. But probably the most destructive technique we employ is to withhold our love and nurturing from these children, rationalizing that we are doing this for their own good. "We will show them love when they are lovable." Unfortunately, the result of withholding love tends to be *separation*, which can become an uncrossable chasm. None of us wants that, so what can we do?

Five Patterns to Practice

1 Build Trust and a Sense of Security

Do this by finding out what the child likes and dislikes. Use that information to calm and comfort the child when he responds defiantly. Approach this child slowly. Try to involve yourself without being intrusive. Respect the child's boundaries and meet the inflexibility with flexibility.

2 Set Limits

To do this effectively, be firm but gentle. Define what is

acceptable and what is not, especially regarding aggression. For example, “Leah, if you do not want to participate, you can come and tell me privately. You cannot throw your book down and scream.” This needs to be done in conjunction with Step 1. To set boundaries without a relationship is generally ineffective.



Encourage Self-Awareness

Helping the children see themselves as God’s creation with gifts and talents to further the kingdom of God will help them see the positive aspects of their personality. The apostle Paul was not an easy man to get along with, but with God’s hand on him, Paul directed his energy into building

God’s Kingdom.

Ask defiant children to examine what areas they are especially sensitive to. For example, competition can evoke strong emotions in defiant children, especially when they feel a strong urge to win. Help them decide what areas they tend to be tolerant in and help them excel in those areas. For example, self-directed projects let students work alone and do the project their way.



Use Humor

Monitor your spirit. Many of the things that irritate us don’t really matter in the big scheme of things. Laughing at ourselves, and encouraging the students to see humor in life will help the defiant child “lighten up.”



Take Advantage of Physical Exercise and Opportunities to Comfort

Don’t ask the children to sit for extended periods (about 1 minute for each year of age...10 minutes for a 10-year-old, 15 minutes for a 15-year-old, etc.). Movement may help the defiant child feel more in control. Stand back and take a look at class time. Does it offer a variety of movement opportunities? Does it give the children opportunities to make choices? Is the goal to complete a task or for the children to build a relationship with others and with God?

Being a teacher is a wonderful, yet challenging opportunity to exemplify God’s grace.

Questions For Further Study—

1. What must you know about defiant children to keep from aggravating their defiant behavior?

2. What do defiant children fear most?

3. Name some things you can do to help defuse a defiant child’s aggression and resistance to authority.