

Teenage Defiance Is Normal — But That Doesn't Make It Fun

It's all too easy to envision doomsday scenarios when your teen with ADHD acts, well, like a teen! When her behavior gets too defiant, here's a little perspective.



| By Russell Barkley, Ph.D. | Updated August 11, 2025

Close your eyes and imagine you're opening the mail. You find a progress report from your teen's school. The report says that he's failing English and math, and has 15 late assignments in history. You feel your blood start to boil. Your son lied to you again. He said he was up to date on homework and passing all his courses. This is one more example of his irresponsible behavior. He is always irresponsible. He never does what he's told. If he keeps on going this way, he will fail.

Now open your eyes. How do you feel? Probably [angry and full of resentful accusations](#). How would you react if your son or daughter walked through the door right now? Would you yell and scream and ground him for life?

It Isn't as Bad as You Think

What if you could stop yourself from leaping to such negative conclusions? Extreme thinking evokes extreme emotions, which makes it hard to deal with your teen rationally. Negative expectations and beliefs can either eat away at your goodwill toward your teenager or ambush you like a sniper. You need to protect yourself from them.

There are two ways to do this:

Take an honest look at your beliefs about your teen and replace irrational ones with more rational ones. Be aware also that the negative beliefs you can't seem to get rid of entirely are always waiting to rear their ugly heads.

[\[Self-Test: Could Your Child or Teen Have Oppositional Defiant Disorder?\]](#)

Prepare a crisis plan to use when negative beliefs come roaring back to damage your relationship with your teen.

Don't Take It So Personally

If you've thought, "I am tired of my teen talking disrespectfully to me, she's mouthing off on purpose to get even with me for...", you need to balance that thought. Think something like, "Impulsive teens just mouth off when they're frustrated. I'll try not to take it to heart." A certain amount of conflict between parents and teens is inevitable and even healthy. Seemingly malicious behavior is pretty normal development. In fact, a new study shows that when parents reported oppositional behavior in their teenagers — defiance, argumentativeness, and resistance toward parents — without antisocial and delinquent behavior, these teens were more likely to graduate from high school, receive further education, and to use drugs less than teens who were not oppositional in these comparatively benign ways.

In other words, a little defiance and arguing, challenging, or debating by teens who are not antisocial or delinquent is healthy and is positively associated with several good outcomes.

Here are some unreasonable beliefs held by parents of kids with ADHD and more rational beliefs to use instead:

EXTREME: He should always complete homework on time.

BETTER: I'll encourage him to [complete homework all the time](#), but I recognize that this won't always happen.

[Free Handout: 10 Ways to Neutralize Your Child's Anger]

EXTREME: She should never get any speeding tickets.

BETTER: Many teens get a speeding ticket. [They should be responsible](#) for paying it and accept any legal consequences (such as suspension of license).

EXTREME: He should get out of a bad mood when we tell him to change his attitude.

BETTER: Teens are moody and can't always help it. He should let us know when he is in a bad mood and keep to himself. We should not make lots of demands on him at such difficult times.

EXTREME: His room isn't completely cleaned: He will grow up to be a slovenly, unemployed, aimless welfare case.

BETTER: The state of his room has little to do with how he turns out when he grows up.

All parents hold unreasonable beliefs about their teens to some degree. Blind, rigid adherence in the face of clearly conflicting evidence can impede [problem-solving and conflict resolution](#), and damage the parent-child relationship. Research has found that families with oppositional teens adhere to these rigid beliefs more than other families. Do you need more proof that you should think less negatively about your teen?

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