

When children seek control through opposition

How do you help them?

What could opposition look like?

A pattern of...

- Arguing
- Easily losing temper
- Blaming others
- Ignores adult directions
- Difficulty with social interactions
- Difficulty following rules
- Resistant to negotiating

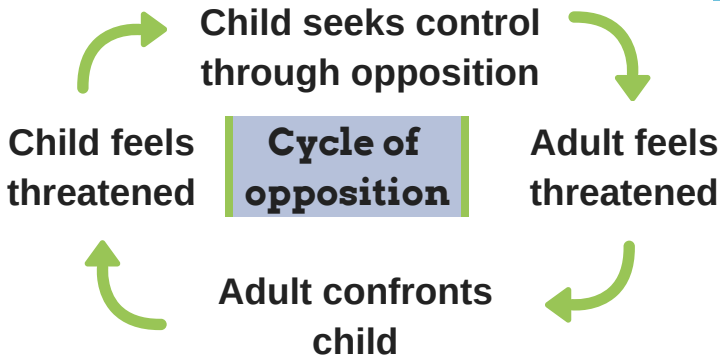


What purpose is the oppositional response serving?

- What their bodies are saying: **"I'm threatened because I'm not in control!"**
"Being in control is the only way I can protect myself!"
- It feels better to look mad than scared or powerless. Oppositional responses may indicate **fight** (I need to be in control! You aren't the boss of me!), **flight** (I'm dissociated right now and didn't hear what you said, but if I show that, I might feel embarrassed, so I'll show mad instead.), **freeze** (I'm stuck, I can't do anything because my body is frozen in fear) or **fawn** (I need to make this situation better by making people happy).

What should you do in the moment?

- Offer **connection before correction**.
- **Stay present and calm** in stance, body language, tone of voice, and take deep breaths and use short statements.
- **Limit the number of adults involved** as additional people can increase sense of threat.
- **Offer choices** if possible as a way to support the child's autonomy.
- **Give them time** to think, calm, and process a direction or request.
- Identify child's **wants and feelings** and offer help.



In the moment



Take a breath



Power down



Be present

How are you reacting?

- **Fear! Threat! Red Alert!** You may interpret child's behavior as threat.
- **"Powering up"** with thoughts like "Oh no you didn't!" or "I'm the boss here" may instigate a power struggle with the child.
- **Withdrawing or ignoring** by turning or walking away tells children they can get their way if they stay big and scary, even if it doesn't feel good.

“What should you say?”

When I gave you that direction, it made your body feel big.

I was thinking you wanted me to help you, but you were thinking you wanted to do it by yourself.

Would you prefer ____ or ____? You can choose.

Why don't we take some deep breaths together?

Reflective Practice

What might you be feeling in your body when a child begins to seek control through opposition?

How can you help prevent opposition behaviors?

Observe & Learn

- **Be aware** of potential triggers
- **Track** when behavior occurs and potential patterns
- **Observe** child's emotional state
- Use incidents to **process** what happened

Connect & Communicate

- **Check in** often – verbally, nonverbally, with or without touch
- **Offer connection** prior to potentially triggering experiences
- **Model** alternative ways of coping with difficult things other than being oppositional
- **Acknowledge** good behaviors and provide positive feedback

Change the Environment

- **Enhance** safety
- **Minimize** environmental triggers
- **Create** a calm down area
- **Add** visual or auditory cues for transitions
- **Offer help** as they learn to do things independently

Celebrate
baby
steps!

What does progress look like?

- The child might shut down or get quiet instead of yelling or arguing.
- Show "no, then yes" by telling you no, calming down and then complying with request, possibly while stomping feet or whining.
- The child may more consistently follow directions when doing difficult things. Tell them you appreciate them staying calm, even when it's hard!



For more resources, visit
macmh.org/toolkit

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