

# CHAPTER 7

## Dealing with Defiance

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*

— Ephesians 6:1 (NIV)

In working with parents from all over, we have observed one thing that stretches them to the breaking point more than any other: *outright defiance*. Parents are generally open and willing to consider many of the principles and approaches explained in *The Connected Child*, and many parents are eager to embrace the holistic approach that we advocate as they focus on making connections and building trust. They are willing to focus on nurture, look for opportunities to playfully engage their child and consider their child's history and complex needs when assessing and dealing with behaviors. But in the face of open defiance—what parents clearly see as willful disobedience and outright disrespect—their blood begins to boil and their “law and order” instincts kick in.

This reaction is certainly understandable, and we would be the last ones to suggest that your child should be allowed to be disobedient, disrespectful or defiant without correction. However, the real heart of the matter is not *if* you correct defiance and disobedience but *how* you correct it.

### *Is it Adoption or Not?*

Closely related to the issue of dealing with defiance is the question that all adoptive parents have asked themselves at some point—*is it adoption-related or not?* When a child with a difficult history (or perhaps a history that is largely unknown) is disrespectful, starts acting up, has frequent meltdowns, is out of control or even becomes violent, it is understandable for parents to wonder whether, and to what extent, the behaviors are related to the child's history or are simply “normal” (albeit unacceptable) behaviors for a child of that age.

As important and as valid as that question may seem, asking, “Is it adoption-related or not?” often doesn't lead us in a helpful direction. In fact, the question can cause parents to get sidetracked in their attempt to stay focused on responding in the best possible way. That is not to say that we shouldn't have compassion for our child's history (we must), nor is it to say that our child's history does not affect behavior (it does). Ultimately, the answer to the question, “Is this behavior adoption-related or not?” may always remain something of an unknown. Yet, given all that we know from the ever-growing body of research, the answer to the question is almost always, at least in part, “yes.” So in the end

where does that leave us?

We are convinced that the principles that must guide and shape the way you relate and respond to your child should not change, regardless of whether the behavior you are addressing is presumed to be adoption or foster care-related or not. After all, the relationship with your child is what you should remain focused on, so building trust and strengthening connections with your child should always be the foundation for addressing behaviors in ways that effectively correct.

## *Staying Focused on Connecting Even When Correcting*

To be clear, our approach should *never* be understood to endorse parents permitting or ignoring defiance. I often tell parents that I am “zero tolerance” when it comes to disrespect and other forms of defiance. Although the word “defiance” does not appear in Scripture, there are plenty of examples of it, starting in the Garden of Eden. God does not accept, ignore or look past defiance, and as parents, neither should we.

At the same time, it is important to note that Scripture does not reveal a “one size fits all” approach to correcting a child’s defiance or disobedience even though there is no shortage of books claiming to offer *the* biblical way to parent and discipline. We must keep in mind that not tolerating defiance does not mean that we must always come down hard or forcefully on our kids. Taking a “zero tolerance” approach in dealing with defiance does not excuse us to abandon our efforts at connecting and building trust with our children, especially when they need correcting. To the contrary, both research and experience indicate that it is imperative that parents of children from hard places consistently seek to connect, even when correcting.

When our children are defiant or disobedient, it’s important that our response be efficient. There is a great deal of literature about the importance and efficacy of parents using an appropriate or measured level of response to correct misbehavior. Many parents mistakenly believe that an all-out nuclear assault is the only right response to defiant behavior. For example, I’ve heard of small children losing privileges for several weeks for refusing to go straight to bed when told to do so. These parents fear that if they give an inch their child will take a mile, and so they feel compelled to act swiftly, decisively and often harshly. In fact, some parenting approaches strongly criticize attempts to have the punishment “fit the crime,” and instead advocate that parents respond with a punishment that is both punitive and painful (be it physical or otherwise). These approaches suggest that harsh punishments are the only way to make an impression on a child and will make the child less likely to repeat the defiant or disobedient behavior.

While there is a certain logic to this mindset, it ignores a number of important realities for our children, not the least of which is their history and their propensity to live and operate in a constant state of fear. As we explained in Chapter 4, most of our children still desperately need to replace fear with trust, and until they do, logic and consequence-based approaches are likely to make matters worse, not better.

Instead, thinking back to Chapter 6, you will recall that as part of the IDEAL response we advocate that parents respond immediately (that is the “I” in IDEAL). But equally important is that parents act efficiently (that is the “E” in IDEAL). An efficient response is one that uses only the amount of correction needed to address the behavior and “get the train back on the track.” And again, during and after situations that require correction, we believe it is critical for the emphasis to remain on maintaining (and even strengthening) our connection to our children.

## ***Does Defiance Always Require a Serious Response?***

Some parents find themselves perplexed when it comes to dealing with defiance and other misbehavior. Instinctively, they know it is “serious business.” They know it is not right or good (and certainly not pleasing to the Lord) for their children to be defiant or disobedient. Because parents love their children, they know that they must respond to misbehavior. However, many parents automatically conclude that they’re required to respond in a very serious and authoritative manner. As a result, parents instinctively resort to the “big voice,” start the countdowns (you can hear it now: “one ... two ... two and a half ...”), threaten punishments or consequences, take privileges away and on and on. These responses are levied against virtually every infraction, be it large or small.

But there are other practical ways to connect while correcting that allow parents to treat defiance as serious business without requiring them to always be so, well, serious. One key strategy is to use playful engagement in correcting interactions with your child whenever possible. In the face of defiant behavior, playful engagement is an approach proven to be very effective for children from hard places. Even when a situation requires that you actually become more “serious” and forceful in order to stop and correct a behavior (for example, by using a more serious tone, louder volume and slower cadence in your voice and by communicating seriousness with your facial expression and posture), it is important to return to playful engagement as quickly as possible once the situation is over and the behavior is changed or corrected.

### ***Making the Right Moves in the Defiance Battle***

*By Amy Monroe*

Susan recently recounted a recurring issue she was dealing with at home with her six-year-old son, Seth, whom she adopted from foster care. The situation was becoming increasingly problematic and was causing a great deal of frustration. It involved outright defiance, but it started with a simple pair of socks.

Getting ready for school can be a challenging undertaking. Kids are cranky, parents are rushed—the whole routine is a recipe for disaster. While getting ready for school, Susan asked Seth to give her his socks so she could help him put them on. Somewhat playfully (but also to push her buttons), Seth threw the socks toward her. Following the advice of the therapist that her adoption agency referred, Susan immediately placed Seth in time out for six minutes (the number of minutes that matched Seth’s age). The therapist also instructed that if Seth did not act appropriately while sitting in time out, Susan was to add another six minutes for each instance of misbehavior.

The morning that Seth threw the socks he ended up sitting in time out for more than 40 minutes! The next morning, he sat in time out nearly as long. Susan readily acknowledged the harm Seth had suffered in the past and that developmentally he was not yet as capable as his age might suggest. But she was equally convinced that Seth knew what he was doing and knew that it was wrong. He was being defiant and, according to what she had been told, it was imperative that she put an end to it.

After several days of this type behavior (at different times during the day), Susan finally called another mom in the adoption ministry at her church to get her take on the problem. This other mom suggested the possibility that the punishment Susan was imposing didn't really "fit the crime," and although Seth certainly should not be allowed to be defiant, there may be a more effective way to remedy the situation.

Her suggestion for Susan was simple and straight from *The Connected Child*. She suggested that Susan use playful engagement and "re-do's" in response to Seth's sock-throwing defiance (and similar infractions). Rather than treat it as a capital offense, this mom encouraged Susan to simply allow Seth to "try it again" while using a playful tone and cadence in her voice and a non-threatening posture. Ignoring the advice she had been given by the therapist regarding time outs, Susan began responding to sock throwing incidents and other situations with as much playful engagement as the situation would allow. She began offering Seth a chance to "try it again" while keeping the mood as playful as possible, but without allowing any misbehavior to go uncorrected. She was immediately encouraged by the results.

Of course, this approach didn't work immediately on every occasion. Sometimes, Seth would have to "try it again" a few times before he got it right. But all in all, Susan found this to be a far more successful approach. What's more, dealing with Seth's defiance in this manner didn't lead to frequent escalation and prolonged battles like before.

Although playfully engaging and offering "try it again" opportunities was time consuming in its own right, Susan wasn't as frustrated and drained as she was before. Not all acts of defiance are created equal and certainly no one response is right for all situations. But it is important for parents to remember what Susan discovered—although defiance and misbehavior are serious business, our response can become an avenue to deeper, more joyful connection.

## Key Scripture Verses

There is a story in the Bible that offers some helpful insight into how Jesus responded to a man whose life, and indeed his very livelihood, was blatantly defiant and contrary to what God desires. His name was Zacchaeus, and Luke records Jesus' encounter with him as follows:

*A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*

*When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.*

*All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'"*

*But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."*

*Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

—Luke 19:2-10 (NIV)

## *Relationship is the Key to Transformation*

We can all probably recall the Sunday school song about Zacchaeus, but that “wee little man” and his encounter with Jesus reveals an important lesson. It is interesting to notice that Jesus, upon calling Zacchaeus down from the tree, did not rip into him with a long lecture or sermon about what a scoundrel and cheat he was. Neither did Jesus isolate him, shame him or otherwise try to punish or make an example of him. Instead, Jesus invited Zacchaeus into relationship. Sharing a meal with someone in the first century had far-reaching and profound social implications, and Jesus doing so with Zacchaeus the tax collector was nothing less than scandalous. But as with many other life-changing encounters that people had with Jesus, we see that Jesus found it important to connect with Zacchaeus in order to lead him toward transformation. No doubt this did not sit well with many, including the religious elite of that day. And if we are honest, this may not sit all that well with us as we apply it to our children. But it is difficult to read the Gospels or think about our own transforming encounter with Jesus and deny that he uses a relationship (connection) to bring about real and lasting change in response to our sin (defiance).

Likewise, parents with children from hard places are likely to encounter others who will not understand or agree with an approach that places such a significant emphasis on connecting, especially in response to defiance. Many people may misinterpret or misunderstand what we are suggesting, especially if they are not familiar with children from hard places and the impact their history can have. Even so, we encourage you to always remember *your* goal—to develop a deep and lasting connection with *your* child in order to help him heal and grow. Much will be required of your child along the way; even more will be required of you. In the end, however, it will be from a strong and secure foundation of connection that you will best be able to teach, correct and truly love your child.

### ***Rules of Connected Families*** ***(from The Connected Child, page 136)***

- **A child** may not dominate the family through tantrums, aggression, back talk, whining or any other tactic.
- **Parents** are kind, fair and consistent; they stay calm and in control. They administer structure and limits, but they also provide a great deal of nurturing, praise and affection.
- **A child** is encouraged to use words to express his or her needs directly and respectfully.
- **Parents** honor a child’s boundaries and respectfully listen to his or her needs and requests. They never shame or ridicule a child’s perspective.
- **Parents** meet all reasonable needs and requests. They say, “Yes,” whenever they can. Occasionally they allow a compromise, and at times they say, “No,” and deny requests.
- **Parents** respond to misbehavior immediately. They redirect the child to better choices, let him or her practice getting it right and then praise their child for improvement. Once the conflict is resolved, they return to playful and warm interactions with their child.

## ***Questions to Consider and Discuss:***

- 1. When your child is being defiant or deliberately disobedient, what goal(s) do you hope to achieve with your response? Be specific.**
- 2. Do you find that you sometimes “overreact” to defiance and similar misbehavior? If so, why?**
- 3. Are you afraid that if you use playful engagement in your approach to correcting, your child (or others) will see you as a “weak” or “permissive” parent? Are you afraid this approach will not work with your child?**
- 4. Do you think Jesus was “tough” enough in his handling of Zacchaeus?**
- 5. Are you afraid of what others may think or say about the way you parent if you handle certain situations, especially those involving discipline, differently than they recommend?**
- 6. What are some ways you can be “zero tolerance” in your response to your child’s defiance or similar misbehavior while still remaining focused on connecting? Talk about specific examples or situations.**