

From **DEFIANCE** to **COMPLIANCE**

What parents need to know to transform resistance into obedience

by Terry Illes, PhD

“CASEY, I’VE TOLD YOU A DOZEN TIMES TO TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE, and it’s still sitting there smelling up the kitchen. Why don’t you ever listen to me?” That question—Why don’t you do what you are told?—is one of the most pressing concerns of parents of a child with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The problem of noncompliance, not doing what he or she is told, is one of the most common reasons parents seek outside professional help for their child with AD/HD.

Imagine how much easier life might be if your child actually complied with your commands without first making you maneuver through an obstacle course of resistance and conflict. I have even had several parents tell me that they might not have sought an AD/HD evaluation if their child had been more compliant.

Fortunately, there are strategies to make compliance a reality and not just wishful thinking. The problem of noncompliance is not restricted to children with AD/HD, and the subject has attracted the attention of parenting experts. As a result, a number of compliance training programs have been developed to help parents teach their children to be more compliant. These parent training programs are described for clinicians in books such as *Defiant Children: A Clinician’s Manual for Assessment and Parent Training* by Russell Barkley, PhD (Guilford Press, second edition, 1997) and *Helping the Noncompliant Child: Family-Based Treatment for Oppositional Behavior* by Robert J. McMahon, PhD, and Rex L. Forehand, PhD (Guilford Press, second edition, 2005).

Intended for parents, this article will guide you through the basics of compliance training, based on the programs developed by Barkley, McMahon, and Forehand. But, first, let’s take a look at some of the common mistakes parents make that contribute to noncompliance.

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What not to do

“Bad” parenting does not cause AD/HD. “Good” parenting does not prevent the disorder. For better or worse, however, your discipline style can have a significant impact on your child’s compliance rate. Parents who know “what not to do” are in a better position to accept “what to do.”

When my two sons were five and three years old, we had a daycare provider in our home named Chantal. On one occasion, a neighbor asked if Chantal would be able to tend her five-year-old daughter, Molly, for the day. Although Molly’s mother was a very bright and competent accountant, she was less skilled when it came to consistently disciplining her young daughter. Indeed, she constantly followed Molly around repeating dozens of commands without ever gaining compliance. Chantal agreed to tend Molly for the day, but when I arrived home from work, Chantal appeared agitated.

When I inquired as to how the day had gone, Chantal asked why I hadn’t mentioned to her that Molly had a disability. Perplexed, I asked, “What disability?” Chantal replied that it was obvious that Molly had a hearing loss because she hadn’t responded to Chantal all day long. Chantal was astounded when I informed her that this was not so and that Molly was not hearing impaired. Molly had merely learned to tune out adults because their words had so little consequence for her that she appeared to be deaf. Indeed, adults had become “background noise” like the humming of a fan or heater. The goal of compliance training is to bring the “background noise” into the foreground.



Parents often inadvertently teach their child to be noncompliant by committing the following discipline mistakes:

- Parents form their commands in many different ways, thus making it difficult for their child to distinguish between a command, when compliance is not an option, and a request, when not complying may be an option.
- Parents give too many commands in a day without obtaining compliance, which teaches their child that the commands are merely “background noise.”
- Parents vary their response to noncompliance depending on their mood or the immediate circumstances. This inconsistency encourages a child to “push to the limits” to determine how much he or she might get away with before his or her parents become upset.
- Parents give in to their child’s coercive strategies (such as throwing a tantrum) to avoid compliance.
- Parents fail to reinforce compliance or to manage noncompliance.

Three steps to compliance

Compliance training provides parents with a well-defined set of procedures that avoid the common mistakes noted above. I have a few words of caution, however, before you start the process.

When you begin the training, restrict it to a specific time period (for example, the hours between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM). This will make the training more manageable for you to monitor.

Limit the number of commands you give during this time to a set number of no more than ten. This will make it easier for you to ensure compliance.

Keep the commands simple and easy for your child to complete in a short time period. The key to the training is having success at the onset of the compliance training.

Compliance training is most appropriate for children of elementary school age. Whether it is appropriate with preschoolers depends on the child’s ability to understand the connection between compliance and noncompliance and the consequences (rewards and time-out). With adolescents, strategies that actively involve them (such as negotiation training) are more effective.

With these cautions in mind, there are three steps to compliance training: (1) forming the command, (2) rewarding compliance, and (3) managing noncompliance.

Forming the command

The command (sometimes called a “precision” command) has three parts:

- Begin with your child’s name. This will attract your child’s attention and gain eye contact.
- Follow with the phrase “you need to.” If you use this phrase whenever you issue a command, your child will learn to associate this phrase with a command. This helps to prevent the command from becoming “background noise.”
- Clearly state the behavioral expectation. Remember, begin the

Time-Out PROCEDURES

Purpose

To teach your child that you, as the parent, are able to interrupt an inappropriate behavior (noncompliance) until the appropriate behavior (compliance) occurs.

Where

Select an isolated location, but be sure it is a place that you can still monitor. I recommend using a kitchen chair placed in a hallway, landing, or an infrequently used room.

How Long

The length of time-out should be no more than, but can be less than, one minute per each year of your child’s age. If the duration is too long, time-out becomes too unpleasant and your child will be more likely to become very upset. The more upset your child becomes, the less likely that he/she will learn anything beneficial from the experience.

Rules

Your child must remain in the time-out chair and cannot play with any objects. Although your child may talk while in time-out, you cannot respond to anything he/she might say. Do not give



your child attention during the time-out session.

Dealing with Rule Violations

If your child violates a time-out rule, reset the timer for the first and second rule violations. If your child continues to resist time-out, do not allow your child to maneuver you into a physical confrontation or verbal war. Instead, suspend all privileges for a specified time period and then provide another opportunity for your child to complete the time-out session. Repeat this process until your child has successfully completed time-out, even if it means continuing the procedure the following day.

Example

“Jordan, I can see that you are not ready to follow the time-out rules. I will give you another chance to complete your time-out session in ___ minutes.” (I recommend about fifteen minutes with children in the early elementary school grades and gradually add time with older children). “However, until the session is completed, you cannot ___ (watch TV, play video or computer games, play outside, use the cell phone, go online, and so forth).”

training with a task that is not difficult for your child to complete. An example of an effective command would be: "Brandon, you need to put your books on the shelf immediately."

Rewarding compliance

Reinforcement is essential to changing your child's behavior. It provides your child with the impetus for putting forth and maintaining the effort to do what is important to you (compliance) rather than what comes more easily to your child (noncompliance). You may use the Star Command Chart (shown on this page) to keep track of your child's compliance rate and to determine when a reward has been earned.

Make sure that your expectations for compliance are reasonable, however. If your child's current rate of compliance is fifty percent, don't expect an immediate improvement to ninety percent. As a general guideline, I recommend that parents shoot for an initial rate of improvement of approximately thirty percent. Thus, this parent might expect their child's compliance rate to improve from fifty percent to seventy percent. If this parent was using the Star Command Chart, then the child might earn a reward if he/she complied on seven of ten trials.

Managing noncompliance

So far, it's been smooth sailing: You give the command, your child complies, and you provide a reward. However, it won't take long before your child tests the limits to discover what you will (or won't) do if he/she doesn't comply. This is a test of wills that you cannot afford to fail, for you need to use noncompliance as an opportunity to teach your child that you are prepared to manage this misconduct. Consider the following strategies for noncompliance.

First line of defense: Noncompliance to the first command. If your child does not comply with your initial command, your first recourse is to repeat the command but with some variation. In this second version of the command, you will count to ten out loud, and warn your child that he/she will have to go to time-out if there is not compliance to the command. This second command serves two functions. It tells your child how far he/she is permitted to push the limits (until the count of nine). It also clearly states the consequence of noncompliance.

If your child complies before you count to ten, again permit a move on the Star Command Chart. Thus, your child earns a move on the reward chart if he/she complies with either the first



STAR COMMAND

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
10	10	10	10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1	1	1	1



TARGET BEHAVIOR: Complying to Parental Commands

When my mom or dad gives me a command, I will say:
"Yes, I will"

And, then I will do it before the count of ten

Instructions
 The parent should give 5-10 precision commands per day. Each day, the parent should put a star or mark in the box to indicate which box the child must reach in order to earn a daily reward. For example, if the parent decides to issue 10 commands that day, a checkmark might be placed in box #6 (see shaded area). Thus, in order to obtain the reward, their child must comply with at least 6 of the 10 administered commands (or a compliance rate of 60%). Each time the child complies with the command before the count of 10, the child marks the next box until all of the daily commands have been given (stickers or a stamp may be used to mark the progress up the chart). If the child reaches the designated box (in this case, box #6), the reward is earned.

INTERVENTION FORM #312

The Star Command Chart, developed by Terry Illes, PhD, will be available to the public for a limited time in a full-page printable format on the CHADD Web site; go to www.chadd.org/attention. After the June issue is archived, the chart will be available in the *Attention* 2008 archives for members only.

or second command. This allows your child some behavioral latitude before he/she complies. For example, you might say: "Brandon, you need to put your books on the shelf before I count to ten or else you will go to time-out for ___ minutes."

Second line of defense: Noncompliance to the second command. Now we get to the heart of the problem. If you are planning to use compliance training in your home, your child probably has a high rate of noncompliance. Do not expect this to change overnight; your child will continue to challenge your willpower and authority. When this occurs and your child fails to comply before the count to ten, follow these steps:

- Place your child in time-out for the predetermined amount of time (see the sidebar on page 16, "Time-Out Procedures").
- When the time-out period has expired, repeat the command using the exact format you used with the previous command (again include the counting and the time-out warning).
- If your child complies, provide praise, but a point is not earned on

the Star Command Chart. If your child does not comply, repeat this routine until your child does comply.

This last condition is the downfall of many parents. Too often, parents give up after they have placed their child in time-out a few times, either due to frustration or to inconvenience. This means that you must carefully plan your compliance training so that you are likely to have the time and patience to carry out the procedures.

Stay committed and positive

Although some strong-willed children will withstand several time-outs rather than relent, almost all children will eventually comply if their parents demonstrate a commitment to the process. Implemented correctly, compliance training offers a clear choice to your child: You can comply with either the first or second command and work toward a reward, or you can comply later without earning a point toward a reward. Thus, the child's choice is not whether or not to comply, but only whether to comply while earning a reward or to comply without earning a reward.

Your efforts to teach your child to be compliant will be more successful if you maintain a positive and supportive attitude. Make the process as upbeat and as much fun for your child as possible. Remember, compliance is not something that comes easily to your child. If you keep that thought in mind, you may be surprised at how quickly you observe improvements in your child's rate of compliance. **A**