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The Strengths of the Oppositional Defiant Child

By **Kim Abraham LMSW** and **Marney Studaker-Cordner LMSW**



Do you have an ODD child or teen who constantly argues and fights your authority, refusing to follow the rules of your home? When the number for his school shows up on your caller identification, do you cringe in fear of what trouble he's in now? When you have an oppositional, defiant child, it's painful to read the seemingly endless Facebook statuses of proud parents beaming about how wonderful their child is. One mom recently shared with us, "I'm happy for my friends that they seem to have such great family lives. But it's hard to see posts about their kids getting straight A's, when my son swears at me every night about his homework."

Whether it's worrying about what others will think of your child (or you) or, fear for that child's safety or well-being, fear drives you to try and change their personality.

But believe it or not, there are some definite *strengths* that go hand-in-hand with that challenging, ODD personality. This week, we're going to show you how to see your child through a different lens, including stories of ODD kids with whom we've worked. If you can stop for a moment and see the positive aspects of your ODD child's personality, it can strengthen you. Your child can actually be a good teacher – if you are open and willing to learn. ^

Look at Your Child. Does He/She Have These Strengths?

1. **Creativity.** ODD kids can be extremely creative when it comes to getting what they want. The same adolescent girl who can't solve the problem of how to deal with a sibling can design a plan to get out of a locked house when grounded that would impress Houdini.

13-year-old Jack was mechanically gifted. He fought with his parents about everything from going to school to his choice of friends. But put him in front of a car, and he could fix even the toughest problem. Wanting to build on that strength, his parents finally gave in and purchased the old, rundown car he begged for. "He'll never get it running," said his father. Six months later, Jack was tooling around town in his "beater." His law-abiding parents set the rule: no driving until you have a license! Jack, of course, drove it anyway. His parents came up with the idea of putting a "club" on the steering wheel, locking it in place. They were quite proud of their creativity until, a few months later, the car was parked just a little bit off center in the driveway. Jack had (very creatively) purchased a separate steering wheel, which he stashed in the woods. When mom and dad left, he simply removed the original steering wheel – club and all – replacing it with his spare and he was off and running. Was this a dangerous and defiant behavior? Absolutely. Were his parents frustrated at his level of defiance? Sure. But they learned to appreciate their son's resourcefulness! Ten years later, Jack never has to pay a mechanic to fix his vehicles.

2. **Determination and Strength.** Kids with oppositional and defiant personalities are the most determined individuals you'll ever meet. Some kids follow rather than lead, quickly complying with rules and traditions. Others "go with the flow," rarely making waves for fear of disappointing others or possibly failing. ODD kids have none of these traits. Their motto: While you're all paddling downstream, I prefer to swim *upstream* – it's more challenging and interesting! And the more you oppose me on it, the more determined I'll be to swim upstream.

15-year-old Lindsay argued daily with her parents, skipped school and often stayed out past curfew. She also had an unflinching love for animals. It became her mission to save as many lost, abandoned or abused animals that she possibly could. Her mother warned her constantly, "One of these days you're going to get hurt. Stop picking up all these strays!" Friends and family were critical, saying her efforts were

pointless. Since she couldn't keep all the animals who needed her – it was against her mother's rules and simply wasn't possible as there were hundreds of them – she used her strengths of creativity and determination. She educated herself on how to safely rescue animals, minimizing the risks to herself as much as possible. She became connected to local animal rescues – some as far as a hundred miles away – that would care for the animals she found. When she couldn't link with such resources immediately, she broke her mother's rules and kept an animal in the garage for a day or two while she worked on a placement for it.

Lindsay's determination was an endless frustration for her mom. But it led to hundreds of vulnerable and voiceless animals finding safe haven over the years. Today, as an adult, she is a noted animal advocate and has earned the admiration of those around her, including her mother. Many of us are determined but not all of us have the strength – and courage--to pursue our goals in the face of opposition from others.

3. **Trailblazers.** ODD kids seem to live by the slogan, "I took the path less traveled." Without them, just think of what we'd be missing in the entertainment world alone; many actors and vocalists have expressed childhoods that include skipping or dropping out of school, arguing with authority figures, stubbornness and even jail time. We love the James Deans, Jim Morrisons and Robert Downey Juniors of the world for the cultural icons they've become. The road they took was rough, but they didn't get to icon status by being afraid to challenge norms.

In her autobiography, environmental rights activist Erin Brockovich describes her "inner strength" as often the only thing she had going for her. The same strengths that got her through an adolescence filled with school struggles and a love for "the wild life," empowered her to fight for the rights of others when many would have kept her quiet. Just because your teen isn't well-known or famous doesn't mean he or she isn't a trailblazer. In fact, all oppositional and defiant kids are trailblazers, taking the path less traveled with a willingness to go against societal norms.

4. **Promoters of Personal Growth.** 12-year-old Candace's mom was a teacher in a prestigious school district. She was horrified when Candace began wearing clothes to school that she had literally picked up off her floor from the dirty laundry pile. One day Mom groaned in frustration,

"The *dogs* slept on her jeans the night before, and she wore them *anyway!*" If mom put a basket of neatly folded, clean clothes on the bed, Candace would simply wear the clothes she had on the day before, stains and all. Mom tried bribing Candace with expensive name-brand clothes. She begged her daughter, "Please wear clean clothes. You have no idea how embarrassing this is to me. People will think I'm a terrible mother. I teach in that school!" But Candace still rebelled.

Related: Defiance—or ODD? How to parent your defiant child effectively.

After months of daily arguing and shamefully avoiding the teacher's lounge, mom finally gave up. "I just decided there was nothing I could do and that Candace's choices were not a reflection of me. I can only dress myself in the morning." *Miraculously, the next week Candace began wearing clean clothes.* Mom was astonished by her reply: "You always told me it doesn't matter what people think of you and that your true friends will love you for who you are, not what you have or how you dress. You're always saying that I shouldn't judge others. I wanted to show you what a hypocrite you are."

Years later, Candace's mom remembers how her daughter's behavior really did lead her to personal growth. "She was right. I cared a lot—too much—about what others thought of us, and I did judge others. It's a lesson I never forgot."

Why are we telling you these stories and asking you to see the strengths in your child's challenging personality? It's because the bottom line in living with an ODD child is always fear and often insecurity. Whether it's worrying about what others will think of him (or us), fear for that child's safety or well-being, **fear drives us to try and change the personality.** In a meeting of multiple adults (teachers, social workers, parents and counselors), 15-year-old Billy shared, "I feel like you're trying to change me. Not just my behavior – but *me*. Can't you just accept me for who I am?" For parents of ODD kids, one of the hardest tasks we face can be accepting our child for *who he is*. It's a constant lesson in learning to let go of trying to control someone we would give our lives to protect.

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Kimberly Abraham, LMSW, has worked with children and families for more than 25 years. She specializes in working with teens with behavioral disorders, and has also raised a child with Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Marney Studaker-Cordner, LMSW, is the mother of four and has been a therapist for 15 years. She works with children and families and has in-depth training in the area of substance abuse. Kim and Marney are the co-creators of The ODD Lifeline for parents of Oppositional, Defiant kids, and Life Over the Influence, a program that helps families struggling with substance abuse issues. Their first children's book, *Daisy: The True Story of an Amazing 3-Legged Chinchilla*, teaches the value of embracing differences and was the winner of the 2014 National Indie Excellence Children's Storybook Cover Design Award.

