

A Message of Hope for Parents of Defiant Children

By Kim Abraham, LMSW



The holidays can be a tough time for everyone. And when you're parenting an oppositional, defiant or challenging child, the holidays can be more than tough; they can be downright awful. My son is in his thirties now, but all I have to do is close my eyes, and I can remember so clearly the arguing and my feelings of hopelessness and despair. Hearing Bing Crosby on the radio singing "White Christmas" didn't make me smile; it made me change the station!

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Instead of anticipating the holidays with joy, I absolutely dreaded Christmas as it typically brought disappointment, anger, and sadness. One year, instead of shopping for Christmas presents, my husband and I found ourselves out buying plaster to fix the hole my son had kicked in the living room wall. So, if you're going through difficult times with your child or your family's situation in general, I understand. I've been there.

The saying goes that time heals all wounds. I can honestly say that looking back on things after several years have passed really does give you a different perspective. And so my gift to you is the most valuable thing I can think of: the gift of **hope**. With the perspective of a survivor, here are some reasons why I wouldn't go back and trade the experience of parenting my son for anything else.

1. **Tough Times Make Tough People.** Yes, my son was oppositional and defiant. He challenged me at every turn. He pushed every emotional button I had; he found every weakness within me and played upon it. He brought out fear in me from insecurities I never knew I had. But out of chaos and crisis come change, and *I found strength within that I never realized I possessed*. While my son may have brought out the worst in

me (at times), he also brought out the best in me. And for that, I thank him.

- 2. I Belong to an Elite Group of “Special Forces” Parents.** One thing is certain about parenting a challenging child: it sets us apart from all the rest! Like the Navy SEALs, we’ve undergone some of the most challenging and intense situations possible; situations that developed our *courage and resolve*. We have our battle scars; but we also have the *knowledge and wisdom* that come from understanding that life is far from perfect, and that sometimes you have to throw out the traditional “parenting book” and write your own.

I remember the most difficult Christmas season of my son’s childhood. When he was 13, he kicked a hole in our living room wall. Grounding meant nothing to him, but possessions and money did. I told him, “You will need to pay for the damages you have caused. I will be deducting the cost of the plaster and paint from what I normally would have spent on you for Christmas.” This meant little to him at the time because Christmas was still weeks away. He figured I would cave, as so many of us do.

Christmas is about giving; not buying my son gifts was one of the toughest things I’d ever done as a parent. But the life lesson—*you are responsible for your behavior and there are always consequences to your choices*—was so much more valuable than the latest video game or cell phone. And so, I lovingly placed a Christmas card under the tree: *Merry Christmas, son. I love you! As your present this year, I fixed the hole in the wall. Your bill has been paid.* It was the last time he ever punched a hole in the wall.

It took tremendous strength not to give in and buy him at least *something* for under the tree. He is my son; I wanted him to be happy, especially on Christmas. But more than that, I wanted him to grow into a responsible, law-abiding citizen. Material things are lost along the years, but values and morals are the gift of a lifetime. And all my “special forces” training gave me the clarity of purpose and will power I needed to face this challenge!

- 3. My Son Needed Me.** When our children are misbehaving, that’s often *when they need us the most*. This is easy to remember when your child

only misbehaves sometimes. My son, on the other hand, argued and defied me on a daily basis. How easy would it have been to fall into the trap of emotionally distancing myself from him? It *hurts* to face your child's anger and defiance. But the bottom line was, my son needed me—even though he didn't know it and certainly would have argued strongly that he *didn't*, he absolutely did.

Years later, I can see that this seemingly "stubborn" child was born with the personality and the will to not compromise when he feels strongly about something. At times, those traits have served him well—at other times, not so well. But because I know that I provided him with what he needed growing up, now that he's an adult, I can accept that it's his journey, not mine.

4. **I Love My Son.** Finally, no matter what we've gone through over the years, I love my son. I haven't always *liked* or *agreed* with his behavior or his choices, but I *have always loved* him. There were days I had to dig deep to remember it. Sometimes I had to write it down to remind myself, but love was what got me through the challenge of parenting. Through good times (and yes, there were some good times) and bad, for better or worse, he's my child and I love him.

My wish for you, your child and your family this holiday is hope. If the peace and joy of the season seem overshadowed by the challenges you are facing, know that you are not alone. Everyone here at *Empowering Parents* is here to support you. And I am with you in heart and spirit.

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About Kim Abraham, LMSW



Kimberly Abraham, LMSW, (right) 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. She and Marney Studaker-Cordner (left) 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.