

## introduction

When a child acts up all the time, it's easy to believe that he is the only one who behaves that way—or at least that he's the very worst. Naturally, this perception leaves parents berating themselves—"Why can't I control my own child?"—and feeling quite alone.

You are not alone, and quite probably your child's behavior is not worse than that of all the other kids out there. Recent studies show that anywhere from 5 to 8% of children in the United States have a significant problem with oppositional, noncompliant, and defiant behavior, and those figures include only children whose behavior is bad enough to be diagnosed as a behavioral disorder. A great number more could be considered "difficult" (even though their parents might be tempted to call them "impossible").

As you undoubtedly know, these kids drive their parents crazy—and sometimes other adults and even other kids, too—by refusing to do what adults ask or expect of them, by being ornery and temperamental, by breaking or ignoring common rules. As a result, they don't fit in easily or get along with others. The way they act might stand in the way of their succeeding in school and developing a normal social life. Perhaps worst of all, their behavior can seriously harm the parent-child relationship, weakening the bond that all children need to mature into happy and healthy adults.

I know this situation is demoralizing to parents and detrimental to their children because I've counseled thousands of parents who have found themselves trapped in a pattern of power struggles with a son or daughter (most often a son). If you could get together with just a fraction of those parents, you'd realize how many perfectly nice people are facing the same problem you are: frequent

bouts of child defiant behavior and a sense of losing control over your children.

This book is my way of offering you the support, experience, and wisdom of other parents. For more than 36 years, together with my colleagues at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and later at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester and thereafter the Medical University of South Carolina, I have trained parents, individually and in groups, in methods that help children improve their behavior and get along better in their world. Feedback from parents on what works and what does not has helped us expand and refine our program, so in a very real sense what you will read in this book has been shaped by people like you. Throughout the book, in fact, you will find not only my answers to questions commonly asked by parents over the years but also anecdotes relating how parents—and their kids—have handled difficult situations effectively. I think you'll be as impressed by their creativity as I have been.

Creativity and adaptability are always assets in child rearing, but they can't hold a candle to consistency. Consistency in the way you treat your child—the way you set rules, convey expectations, pay attention, encourage good behavior, and impose consequences for bad behavior—is the key to cleaning up your child's act and is therefore the cornerstone of the program in this book. A child with a prickly temperament will always try your patience, and it's only human to get too tired to enforce the rules sometimes, too desperate for control to discipline fairly, too frustrated to keep conflict from escalating. All this results in what I call "indiscriminate parenting," and it only makes your child more defiant. Consistency is the way to break that pattern, and it may require a lot of work from you.

Why should the burden of change be on you when it's your child who misbehaves? First of all, your child simply may not be able to change if you don't. Your son or daughter needs help, and you're in a perfect position to give it. Second, a major source of your frustration has been your inability to change your child, try as you might. Most parents actually get relief from taking action in an area where they have ultimate control—their own behavior. Third, you have a lot to gain by making these changes. Up to 80% of the parents who have gone through our program have seen lasting change

in their child's behavior. *Children whose defiant behavior is impairing their lives and the lives of their families but is not severe enough to be considered a disorder can achieve normal behavior when their parents make a serious commitment to this program.* Even in more severe cases where a child's defiance persists, the tools learned in this program can greatly reduce the disruptions caused by the child's behavior. When ignored, however, defiant behavior tends to progress into a more debilitating conduct problem in later years, sometimes referred to as *conduct disorder (CD)* or *antisocial personality disorder* by mental health professionals.

If your child is over the age of 12 or tends to be very aggressive or violent, please do not undertake this program without the advice of a professional. Defiant behavior is often too deeply entrenched in older children to be resolved solely through self-help; and if your child is violent, a therapist can help you ensure the safety of your whole family. Otherwise, an investment of only a couple of months of concerted effort can help you transform your home from a battleground to a sanctuary by understanding what causes defiant behavior and learning to manage it. As a result, you should be able to improve your child's compliance with your requests and rules and, in turn, restore family harmony.

This book is divided into two parts: "Getting to Know Your Defiant Child" and "Getting Along with Your Defiant Child." Read all about the problem of defiance, what causes it, and the various ways it can be resolved, and by the end of Part I you should have a much firmer idea of what's going on with your child and what you should do about it. Although the book is designed for self-help, some of you may prefer to use it as guided self-help—that is, to find a therapist you feel you can trust who is familiar with this program and work on it together. Some of you may conclude at the end of Part I that you don't have much of a problem at all. I hope you will read Part II anyway. It is based on solid, proven child-rearing principles that benefit all children—these principles are enumerated in Chapter 4 at the end of Part I—and I'm sure you'll pick up something useful.

Part II is the eight-step parent training program. It should take about 8 weeks to complete, though you should see significant improvement in your child's behavior and your life in 4 to 6 weeks,

and you will want to keep using many of the techniques you learn much longer. Each step depends on successful completion of the one before, so please don't skip around or try picking and choosing only the steps that appeal to you. Not everything you'll be asked to do will be fun or easy, but all of it is necessary. *Above all, do not adopt any of the discipline methods that begin in Step 4 before completing Steps 1–3.*

The early steps in the program should be a refreshing experience for both you and your child. Because the success of the program depends on reestablishing positive interactions first, you'll start by learning to pay uncritical attention to your child and to praise good behavior—in other words, to catch your child being good. You'll be surprised by how often your child does something that calls for a pat on the back and how much he or she appreciates that you've noticed. Once you have this foundation of respect for and approval of your child, you can ease your child into the habit of compliance by practicing with little requests that don't tempt the child to balk. Praise is a big but not all-powerful incentive, so your next step is to learn to use rewards as incentives for cooperating more consistently and on tasks your child finds more objectionable.

Only after you've adopted all these positive methods for getting your child to do what he or she needs to do should you move on to the mild, fair disciplinary methods in the program. These include removing rewards for defiance just as you gave them for compliance, as well as using time-out effectively. By this point in the program (following Step 5), you should have made significant strides, but if you need help controlling your child's behavior away from home, Steps 6 and 7 offer techniques for extending these methods to public places and to school. Part II ends with a look ahead—at how to sustain the progress you've made and how to anticipate and handle future behavior problems.

At the end of the book are some resources for additional information and support. Remember, though, that there are many caring, competent professionals available to help you if this book is not enough. Please contact one—starting with your pediatrician—if you need further assistance.