

# Introduction

Imagine this: When asked by his teacher to solve a math problem, Joe answered, “Four plus four is seven.” The teacher told him the answer was wrong and he should try again. Joe once again answered, “Seven.” The teacher said she would give him one more chance, and again Joe answered, “Seven.” Frustrated, the teacher was tired of these incorrect responses. So she sent Joe to in-school suspension as punishment, hoping that this action would convince him to change his behavior. Answering “four plus four equals seven” was unacceptable behavior in her classroom, and she refused to allow it to take place. The teacher expected a child of Joe’s age to know better. She did not know why Joe thought he could get away with that type of behavior in her classroom.

This example probably (hopefully!) seems ridiculous to you. Of course it is inappropriate for the teacher to handle Joe’s incorrect behavior this way. Clearly, Joe does not know how to solve this math problem; that is, he does not have the skills to solve the problem. Rather than sending Joe to in-school suspension, the teacher would be better off teaching him some addition skills, showing him how to solve the problem, and assisting him in solving the problem correctly. After all, it isn’t that Joe *won’t* solve the problem correctly, it is that he *can’t* solve the problem correctly.

Let’s consider another example. A teacher sees Anita in the hallway digging around in her locker after the bell has rung. The teacher tells Anita that it is time to get to class and that she is late. Anita gets very upset and says, “I’ll get to class when I please. Get off my back!” How should the teacher respond in this situation? This defiant behavior is unacceptable in schools and classrooms. Educators often respond to this form of behavior by threatening some form of discipline, such as detention, in-school suspension, or out-of-school suspension. These procedures are intended to punish the defiant behavior and make it less likely that such behavior will occur again.

Let’s consider the meaning of the word *discipline*. The first definition of discipline in *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1988)

states that discipline means “to punish or penalize for the sake of discipline.” The word *discipline* was derived from *disciple*, which refers to teaching, instruction, and training. Therefore, discipline is concerned with practice or exercise of a skill that is instructed (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971). In this booklet, we suggest that it is often more beneficial to consider “discipline” of students who defy authority to mean “an opportunity to teach and practice a skill that the student has not yet learned.” Consider that Anita may not have the skills to respond appropriately to the situation with which she was confronted, just as Joe did not have the skills to perform the math problem correctly. Thus, rather than threaten Anita with negative consequences for her behavior, the teacher could use the situation as an opportunity to teach Anita how to follow instructions or how to disagree appropriately. After all, teachers are not behavior suppressors. Their goal is to teach new and appropriate behaviors. They are behavior builders!

In our view, the best way to deal with defiant behavior is to prevent its occurrence in the first place. In this booklet we will discuss how to deal with behavior that appears to be defiant through instruction related to the skill deficits of students. This instruction can be provided on many different levels to prevent the occurrence of defiant behavior. One line of prevention involves teaching students appropriate social skills for dealing with potentially problematic situations (e.g., receiving critical feedback from teachers, being told “No” in response to a request) during “planned teaching moments” before these issues arise. Instruction is followed with opportunities to practice the skill and positive reinforcement from others for demonstrating the skill appropriately. Another line of prevention involves identifying “opportunistic teaching moments.” That is, when an opportunity to display an appropriate social skill arises and the student makes an error (e.g., becomes defiant), additional instruction and practice for that skill is provided. Again, positive reinforcement is provided for displays of appropriate responding. A third level of prevention involves dealing with severe defiance, including severe physical aggression, in a manner that keeps both teachers and students safe. Usually, this involves crisis management and is beyond the scope of this booklet.

This booklet is organized into four sections. The first section identifies the skills that students need in their repertoire to help them achieve their needs and desires or state their messages in a less defiant manner. The next section describes a teaching sequence that can be used to teach these skills prior to students engaging in defiant behavior. We also discuss a teaching sequence that can be implemented when displays of defiant behavior occur. These are viewed as opportunities to reteach and further practice appropriate social skills. Next, we discuss issues surrounding building fluency of social skills, as well as how to motivate students to use appropriate social skills rather than to engage in defiance. Finally, we discuss how to teach students to self-manage their social skills so that they continue to display appropriate behavior even when the teacher is not present to provide instruction and to reinforce the occurrence of appropriate behavior.

## **Relevant Skills for Students Who Defy Teachers**

Defiant behavior is often defined as occurring when an individual refuses to obey a command or conform to a rule. In schools and classrooms, there are many rules to which teachers expect student conformity, and there are numerous commands and requests made throughout the day. Students viewed as compliant follow such rules routinely and do what teachers ask of them immediately. Compliant children also appear to have appropriate interaction skills (e.g., negotiating, explaining, requesting), which they use when dealing with authority figures and peers. Students viewed as defiant consistently break rules, appear to ignore teacher requests, and seem to lack appropriate interaction skills. Teachers and other authority figures often assume that students know and understand the school/classroom rules and that they have the appropriate social skills to conform to the rules. Thus, teachers and authority figures often resort to threats of punishment to motivate students to display the appropriate behavior.