

## The Brake Shop Clinic Putting the Brakes On Behaviour



You may have heard of the disorder called "Oppositional Defiant Disorder" (ODD) and wondered what it means. Join the club! To hear the 'symptoms' of ODD, the diagnosis seems to be merely a description of bad behaviour – the criteria doesn't really give you any ideas as to where this comes from, and there is no research suggesting genetic or neurological causes for this disorder. That doesn't leave us with a lot of ideas for dealing with those behaviours, and usually the parents or professionals are left with thinking of ways to motivate the child into behaving.

There IS, however, increasing evidence that oppositional and defiant behaviour does not occur all by itself. In other words, the research that says, "children don't simply choose to be bad" is growing. Many times children have other disorders, and these symptoms are either being mistaken for wilfulness or "brattiness", or are setting the stage for these behaviours to appear. If this is true, then you might expect that once these other disorders are properly recognized, managed, and treated the "bad behaviour" should disappear all on its own.....and this is exactly what some researchers and clinicians are beginning to find!

Many of these disorders can be thought of as being problems with being able to stop oneself – for example, stopping one's movements and sounds (TS), stopping one's impulses (ADHD-PHI), stopping one's attention from wandering (ADHD-PI), stopping one's awareness of every bit of sensory information in a situation, or even stopping one's thoughts (OCD). Being able to stop what you are doing when someone demands that you do something else, without getting angry about it, requires good brakes too – given all of the "leaky brakes" that these children may already have, maybe THESE brakes are leaky too! If that's true, then we shouldn't be looking at these kids as WANTING to be disobedient. Instead, we should be interpreting their problems as a natural reaction to, and result of, their struggles to cope with "leaky brakes". That's very good news, because it means that we can start working WITH these children to solve a mutual problem rather than fighting AGAINST them.



So let's,



- First off – **STAY CALM!** That way you are modelling the appropriate behaviour for the person. This is easier said than done, but it seems to become easier once you realize that these “behaviours” come from a place not of the child’s choosing. And just as there is no point in, for example, taking an epileptic seizure episode personally, so too will taking THESE behaviours personally begin to seem unworkable and illogical.
- Many parents indicate that their child seems to have an “**automatic no**” response – even when asked to prepare for an activity (s)he enjoys! Don’t react as if the “no” is personal (i.e. with emotion) or an invitation for a power struggle...because often it isn’t! Many times an “immediate no” means the child is overwhelmed or “stuck”, and many times this “no” can be changed to agreement if the child is given some time to process the sudden change in plans. Instead of ‘taking the bait’, then, simply come up with new language together (e.g., “I need a second”) for the child to communicate the difficulty that (s)he’s having in putting on the brakes and changing direction. Also, anticipate and prepare for the extra time that will be required for these children to adjust to the new direction.
- Finding out “**what’s up**” – simply listening and reflecting his point of view will make the child more available to think. Incidentally, one does not have to agree with a point of view to still listen to it and reflect it.
- Another technique to try for reducing power struggles is **to quote the rule rather than your authority** in the situation as a parent. For example, rather than saying, “You are going to finish your homework before watching TV because I’m your mother and I said so”, you may wish to try, “I hear that you really don’t want to miss the second part of this show because it is really good, and your favourite show. The rule in this house, though, is that everyone must do their work before they get to have fun”.
- Using the word, “**Stop!**” rather than “**No!**” has been reported by some parents to be useful in averting oppositional reactions.
- **Provide choice options:** “WHEN you are doing your homework, do you want to do it at the kitchen table, or in your room? With the pen or the pencil? On the computer or on paper?” Suggest options for the individual if (s)he seems “stuck”, but keep the choices simple and few in number to prevent overload.

- Emphasize the individual's control in the situation (i.e. it is entirely up to him/her what to do, but the consequences will therefore be of his/her own choosing), and encourage him/her to make the good choice. Discussing choices (or, for that matter, doing problem-solving and or deciding on reparations together) cannot be done well "in the moment" and must either occur in preparation of a situation that often goes poorly well beforehand, or after the break has occurred and the child is again 'available' to talk.
- If the child needs to take a 'break' to decrease stimulation (which will then allow him or her to 'flex' more easily), this should not be done in a punitive way or in a way that further increases stress (i.e. raised voices, forced eye contact, forcing a choice, etc.). In fact, recognizing that a break is needed should be rewarded, the break should entail an activity that is relaxing and fun for the child, and there should be no set time limit on it.
- This is a strategy for the child that has developed an arsenal of techniques to remove him/herself from the situation when work becomes difficult. Before attributing these behaviours as apathy, indifference, or a power struggle, the surfacing of these behaviours should be considered to be a **potential signal that (s)he requires additional assistance** in some regard. It is not a coincidence that psychologists often see the most avoidance behaviours during tasks in which the child's abilities are weakest.
- Given possible self-esteem issues, it will be important to stress to the child that **it is the NON-COMPLIANT BEHAVIOUR that is unacceptable, and not HIM/HER.** Furthermore it can be emphasized that it is the choices (s)he makes that determine whether (s)he receives rewards or punishments, and not whether his/her teacher, peers, or parents like him/her or not.

Once any 'leaky brake' disorders have been properly identified and accommodated for, if the child does not follow through with expectations it is important to use (and you have now "bought the right" to use) good **behavioural modification** ("B-mod") techniques in dealing with the situation. Not because ODD is necessarily due to "bad parenting" or "spoiled children"...but because these things, if they exist, will make any problems even worse!

B-Mod is always a good thing to have in place with any child — it just isn't the solution to every problem and certainly doesn't teach the skills necessary when a person has "leaky brakes". For that reason, **before B-Mod is used it needs to be overlaid with any necessary accommodations for existing disorder(s).** That way, we are more confident that any non-compliance is about lack of motivation (which punishment CAN influence) and not a skill deficit (which punishment can do absolutely NOTHING for).

- It is recommended that the school and home **both involve the child in the development of rules** as this will help to decrease power struggles. As long as adults in the child's life unilaterally lay down rules, defiant rejection of those rules is a way for the child to assert him/herself. Once rules are created together, though, this means that a failure of the rule is also now a personal failure on the part of the child. Hence the child will become more implicitly motivated to invest in the success

of those rules. This is also a way to help the child feel more in control and less 'acted upon', which will have positive ramifications for self-esteem.

- Similarly, it is vital for the child to understand **exactly why certain rules and strategies are in place**: their existence alone is not sufficient. If the child assumes that certain exercises are simply additional burdens adults have inflicted upon him/her, (s)he will rebel against them. If, however, WHY and HOW these strategies will better his/her life is explained, (e.g. emphasizing how these rules make things "fair"), they may be adopted more quickly and easily.

Use the following techniques when making a request:

- Be physically near the child; minimize other distractions that might be present
  - Issue request only after obtaining eye contact with the individual
  - Use a calm but firm voice
  - Use direct statements ("put the toys away now") rather than questions ("will you put the toys away now?")
  - Give only one request at a time
  - Be brief and to the point
  - Look at (i.e. "stare") at the child for 20-30 seconds after the request; this communicates that you mean business and expect compliance. It also gives the individual a chance to re-evaluate what may be an initial, impulsive reaction without applying pressures that increase stress and make brakes even leakier (e.g. raised voice, threats). **Do not repeat** the command until after this period of time has elapsed. Do not stare angrily – simply maintain eye contact and a serious expression.
- If the request is not complied with, the situation should be **discussed** as soon after the child has followed through with expectations and the **tension has subsided**. Be careful not to discuss things while/if the child is still overloaded – see "Putting The Brakes On Rage".
  - The initial part of the conversation should be designed **to determine if the child knows what the expectations are** and how to meet these expectations. If the problem is a result of a lack of knowledge or skills, (s)he will need to be reminded, cued, or taught what to do.
  - If (s)he does know what to do and is being "non-compliant", then in a calm, but firm voice, (s)he should be re-told the expectations. If the child wishes to argue, it is best to continue, using a calm, firm voice, to **outline the choices, with the consequences for each choice clearly explained** to him/her. It is best to make these "natural" consequences. For example,
    - if (s)he damages property then (s)he should provide some kind of restitution

- if (s)he hasn't finished what (s)he has been asked to do then (s)he cannot have his/her snack yet
- If the child continues to be uncooperative, **the consequences should always be followed through on**. It is very important to not concede to his/her wishes once an expectation has been made, as doing so rewards the child for being oppositional and ensures that (s)he will continue to resist others' expectations in the future when they don't correspond to his/her own.
- It will be important to ensure that consequences are **consistent, immediate, and sufficiently aversive**:
  - if, for example, the child recognizes that (s)he can get away with a certain undesirable behaviour **5** times before getting into trouble, rather than learning to not engage in that behaviour (s)he will instead learn to only engage in it up to **4** times. This scenario can be avoided by teaching the child that a particular behaviour will lead to a particular consequence every time; there are no 'build ups'.
  - likewise, if engaging in certain undesirable behaviours results in successfully avoiding whatever it is (s)he does not want to do, the child will learn to do that behaviour more and more and for greater and greater amounts of time to get what (s)he wants. Therefore consequences must, as a component, include completing whatever task it was that was being avoided in the first place.
- Finally, **be careful that punishments**, although intended to be negative, **do not contain positive elements**. For punishment that involves drawing a considerable amount of your time and/or attention may in fact increase rather than decrease the undesirable behaviour.
- The **child's own power of choice should always be emphasized**; rather than being a power struggle between adult and child, this is a situation where the child is master of his/her own destiny.
- Sometimes it can be helpful to **switch tasks momentarily** before going back to the original expectation.
- Some children benefit from **social skills' training that incorporates** verbal mediation strategies, problem solving, perspective-taking, and role-playing. This can help in learning appropriate social behaviours, and in understanding what effect his/her behaviour has on other people.

**An initial reaction from the child to behaviour modification can be expected – for a time the behaviour will get worse.** This is ESPECIALLY true if the child has grown accustomed to getting his/her own way in the past. The child will see these new strategies as beatable too, and so will resist these new standards expecting that you will eventually cave in. Rather than being a step backwards, **this increase in bad behaviour (called an "extinction burst") is in fact progress and the first step towards better behaviour.** The key is to stand firm while the child tests the new status quo: once the child realizes you

aren't going to budge, (s)he will adopt the new rules. Despite how heart-rending this process may feel, it is imperative that neither home nor school drop these new strategies during this new learning time. To do so would tell the child nothing has changed except that (s)he now needs to act out to a greater extent to get what (s)he wants.....making the problems that much worse!!!

Finally, parents, be sure you request that any relevant accommodations found on this hand-out are added to a formalized **I**ndividualized **E**ducation **P**lan (IEP). An informal IEP need not be implemented or transitioned, whereas a formal IEP is a legislated process that also includes the **I**dentification Placement and **R**eview **C**ommittee (I.P.R.C.) that **must** be adhered to, under the Education Act, (Education Act, Regulation 181/98). Any child with identified special needs has access to this process.



© 2007, Dr. B. Duncan McKinlay, Psychologist  
Peter Robinson, Education Liaison

2015, Revised Dr. Jared Berman, Psychologist  
Sharon Skutovich, Social Worker  
Becky Richards, Community Behaviour Consultant  
Debbie Spina, Education Liaison

This and other materials can be found on our website.

[www.leakybrakes.ca](http://www.leakybrakes.ca)

**PLEASE FEEL FREE TO REPRODUCE AND/OR SHARE THIS HANDOUT WITH OTHERS!**