



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Young Children's Defiance Toward Mothers May Be Part of Healthy Development

At very young ages, children's defiant behavior toward their mothers may not be a bad thing. This defiance may in fact reflect children's emerging autonomy and a confidence that they can control events that are important to them.

Those are the findings of a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Michigan. The study is published in the July/August 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

To understand how very young children react to being controlled by their parents, the researchers videotaped 119 mostly middle-class mothers as they interacted with their 14- to 27-month-old children. Mothers were asked to have their children avoid a set of attractive toys and, when play time was over, to get their children to help them clean up those toys they had been allowed to use. Based on the taped interactions, the researchers coded children's behaviors, categorizing them as being defiant, ignoring requests, or being willingly compliant.

Children were most likely to be defiant and least likely to ignore requests when their mothers were sensitive and had few symptoms of depression, and when children were positively interested in their mothers during the interaction. Children of sensitive mothers also tended to be highly cooperative.

Children with mothers who had symptoms of depression were more likely to ignore requests and less likely to respond with defiance. One reason that some children of mothers with such symptoms develop poorly, the researchers suggested, may be that these children do not develop confident assertion with their mothers, learning instead to be overly passive in the face of obstacles.

These results imply that, at ages when parents first ask children to conform to requests and commands, active resistance is not a sign of problems in child development or in relations between parents and children. To the contrary, at these very young ages, children's active resistance may reflect a healthy confidence in their ability to control events and natural, although immature, attempts to do so.

"Although a year or two later, high defiance may be a problem, we found that at this age defiance appeared to be a positive development," according to Theodore Dix, associate professor of human development and family science at the University of Texas at Austin and the study's lead author. "It increased with age and was associated with variables research has shown predict favorable outcomes for children."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 4, *Autonomy and Children's Reactions to Being Controlled: Evidence That Both Compliance and Defiance May Be Positive Markers in Early*

Development by Dix, T, Stewart, AD (University of Texas at Austin), Gershoff, ET (University of Michigan), and Day, WH (University of Texas at Austin). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.