



Why Children Say NO! Understanding and Transforming Resistant Kids

by Todd Sarner, MA, MFT. Director of Transformative Parenting

Carl and Mary are the loving parents of a seven-year-old boy named Billy and a four-year-old girl named Lila. They came to see me for parent consulting because they were increasingly having a hard time with resistance behavior from both of their children. They explained that Billy hardly ever would do as he was told these days and that they were running out of ways to gain his cooperation. It was common to hear Billy scream “NO!” and “I don’t have to!” when asked to do everyday things around the house. Lila wasn’t as difficult but seemed to be becoming more and more like her brother. Almost every day she refused to get in the car when Mary told her it was time to go to school to pick up Billy, and at night she had started to refuse almost everything they tried to feed her for dinner. Carl told me that he thought this was happening because Mary was too “soft” with the children and needed to be stricter. Mary said that Carl just made things worse when he came home from work and started raising his voice to get the kids to do as they were told. They both expressed frustration and confided that the stress of the situation was starting to affect their marriage. They were desperate for help and just wanted to do what’s right for their kids.

Introduction

It can be very frustrating to be the parent of a child who is resistant to our guidance and direction. Occasional resistance is normal and healthy, but it can sometimes get out of control. Like so many other dynamics, our reactions to resistance can actually make things worse and cause *greater* frustration both for our children and for ourselves. It is my goal in this article to help you better understand where most resistance actually originates so that you are able to transform this dynamic in a positive way in your home.

Resistance — what it is and what it isn’t

The best way to explain what resistance *is* may be to explain what it *isn’t*. Often when parents see the behaviors that Carl and Mary experienced in this case, they think their child is being “strong willed” or trying to manipulate them. This behavior has very little to do with either. Most often, resistance is an instinct and an indication that something is wrong. We call this kind of resistance *counterwill*.

Counterwill is a word first coined by Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank. He explained that counterwill is what happens when you perceive someone else is

trying to coerce you into doing something. This is different from *will*, which concerns doing what is necessary to achieve your goals. When we talk about a child being “strong-willed”, we usually mean that we are experiencing counterwill.

Counterwill and Attachment

My mentor, leading developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld (Hold On to Your Kids), explains that counterwill is an instinct that is directly linked to your relationship to your child and that this instinct is meant both to keep your child safe and to help him develop his own individuality over time. Understanding that counterwill is actually very healthy for your child can change how you look at resistance and lead to more successful (and less stressful) parenting.

We know from developmental psychology and attachment theory that the bond between parent and child is the most important factor in a child’s development and behavior. When children are attached in a deep and meaningful way, they want to follow their parents’ lead and will not, for the most part, be resistant.

A critical key to understanding how this works is that the connection between parent and child, their attachment, is not always “on”. By this I mean that if your child (especially a young child) is currently very focused on someone or something else, you do not necessarily have his attachment energy. The relationship is not active in the moment. A child is not meant to take direction from someone to whom he is not currently attached, so you are much more likely to experience counterwill.

This often confuses parents like Carl and Mary because they have such positive relationships with their children. They assume that this means their children should listen to them because they are great parents. The fact is, children are wired not to listen in certain situations.

How counterwill keeps our children safe

Like I said before, children are not meant to take direction from those to whom they are not currently attached, and this is meant to keep them safe.

There is a beautiful intelligence about how a child’s development is meant to unfold. When children are deeply attached to their parents this bond allows us to transmit our rules and values and guide them in a positive way. At the same time, attachment protects our children from outside influences and incompatible messages and values by preventing our children from listening to those to whom they are not attached.

This has wide-ranging implications. If a stranger walks up to your child at the

park and asks your child to do something, your child is meant to say “NO!” because there is no attachment. It also means that if she is not attached to her teacher, she will not listen in class. Counterwill is meant to serve a child’s attachments by protecting her from outside influence.

So when a child like Lila is very attached in the moment to her toys, as a four-year-old often gets, she is less likely to listen to something her mother or father asks her to do. It doesn’t mean she doesn’t love them or isn’t attached to them for the most part, it just means she isn’t right now.

Counterwill also prepares your child for becoming her own person

The counterwill instinct also serves another developmental purpose. It helps a child prepare for her own eventual individuation by letting her practice having her own thoughts and feelings. There are a couple of phases in your child’s development where this is especially true.

In the preschool and kindergarten years, you will see much more unchecked counterwill. Part of this is because of the young child’s brain development. They haven’t quite developed the part of their brain that helps them balance things out and see things from multiple perspectives. This makes counterwill more severe because they are more impulsive than reflective.

Counterwill is also very present in the adolescent years. In this case, it is very developmentally appropriate because adolescence is meant to be a time of diminishing (but not total lack of) parental influence as a child more and more learns who *she really is* as an individual. This doesn’t mean that we back off totally as parents. In some ways our adolescent children need us more than ever. We just have to be more conscious of giving them some space.

The keys to transforming counterwill

There are several principles I teach parents in our classes and in consults for managing counterwill, and I want to address a few of the most important. The objective is not to completely get rid of all resistance in our child. That would be impossible and not very good for them. What I would like to do is help you make counterwill a much more manageable dynamic.

The most important advice I give parents is not to let counterwill cause disruption in their relationship with their child. It is common for parents to react very negatively when their child is resistant. The temptation is to take it personally and to resort to saying and doing things that make the resistance worse — including taking things away from the child or using separation based discipline like time outs or 1-2-3 Magic. As I’ve explained, counterwill is strongest when there is a

lack of connection, so creating more disconnection will only lead to stronger resistance.

The second thing I recommend is that you strive always to “collect” your child before you direct him. This is probably the most common advice I give and is directly from Dr. Neufeld’s book and courses. Collecting means to connect with your child first. Do not assume the connection is there at all times. By providing some sense of connection and closeness before asking a child to do something, we can avoid a lot of resistance. With a young child, you might sit next to him and share in what he is doing. Get connected and then gently guide him to what’s next.

Lastly, I recommend that you find ways of helping your child to exercise his “will muscles”. Children (and many adults for that matter) do not yet have a well-developed sense of will and need to have the space and opportunity to practice building it. This means that you put your child in charge of something when you feel it’s appropriate, or let him make decisions about certain things — as long as you’re OK with the potential decisions. Dr. Neufeld calls this the “little steering wheel”. Think of those shopping carts at the grocery store that have a car attached in the front. Your child gets the feeling of being in control but you are really doing the steering. An example is giving your child the choice between two different foods you’re willing to prepare at dinner time. The child gets the experience of choosing, but you don’t have to cook something you don’t want to (or can’t).

“But sometimes I’m in a real hurry and I don’t have time to wait for my child to be ready to go”

I understand this and realize that in some instances you will not be able to do things the way I am suggesting. However, if you started paying attention to how much time you spend right now with the fallout of counterwill — the frustrations, the punishments, and the meltdowns — you would realize that you can’t afford not to change how you are doing things. Misunderstanding and disrespecting this counterwill instinct is not effective and, more importantly, is not healthy for your relationship with your child.

“Don’t kids have to learn to listen when their parents ask them to do something?”

Of course parents need to know that their children will, for the most part, follow their lead and do what they say when needed. It’s just important to understand that this works better when our children *want* to listen to us, not when we force them to listen. Children who are deeply attached to their parents *want* to follow their lead. In fact, it feels *wrong* not to.

How Carl and Mary transformed their relationship with their kids

I asked Carl and Mary to do an experiment for a week. I asked them to pay more attention to collecting their children. I suggested they especially pay attention to this around transition times (the morning, after school, before bedtime) and when they needed their children to cooperate. These transition times can be especially difficult, as the children are more prone to counterwill. Furthermore, I warned them not just to collect their children when they needed to direct them, but also to do so consistently throughout the day.

I also suggested that they find opportunities each day to let both of the children exercise their “will muscles” by finding appropriate situations where they could be in charge of something or help make decisions.

In addition, I invited Carl and Mary to be more aware of how often they were forgetting to collect each other. I told them couples often get into big relationship trouble when they start forgetting to greet each other warmly when one of them comes home. They smiled big, knowing smiles as they realized how much counterwill had played a part in their own relationship. Carl shared that every time he came home from work and was just “told what to do” he got angry and felt a ton of resistance himself. Now he understood why.

The results were nearly instant. After just a day or two, they noticed changes in their home. They weren’t butting heads with the kids as often and they were getting along better with each other. After a full week things were not perfect all the time, but they reported dramatic improvements.

Conclusion

Resistance in our children can be frustrating, but much of our frustration can be transformed when we realize this is often a natural function, an instinct, that is meant to help keep our kids safe and to help them become their own unique individuals over time.

When we are frustrated and reacting to counterwill in our children it is more difficult for us to do our jobs as parents. On top of that, when our children are stuck in resistance, things often get worse when we react to their resistance with reprimands and punishments.

Counterwill is especially difficult for us in our busy, fast-paced world because we have a lot to do. We want to feel like our children are on our team. The key to this is that we are the team’s coach — the one with greater wisdom and experience — and we need to take the lead with our kids.

Some next steps...

1- Do what Carl and Mary did and spend one week, as an experiment at first, focusing on the three principles I outlined in the article.

- a. Avoid reacting negatively to counterwill in your child.*
- b. Collect before you direct.*
- c. Let your child practice making some decisions in his life.*

If possible, get your spouse to participate with you. If this isn't possible, enlist a like-minded friend with a child around the same age to do the experiment in their home at the same time.

2- Keep in mind the whole week that you are the "coach" and you are the one who is meant to take the lead and set the tone with your children. Stop yourself if you get in "reaction" mode.

3- Make an appointment with your experiment partner to check in after the week and share your experience. Talk about what worked and what you struggled with. Then discuss what changes you can put into place in your household to transform resistance long-term.

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