

**D**eliberately not following instructions is Daniel's favourite game. Your initial delight at his cheeky challenges has waned into real frustration. It seems that he will not follow the simplest instruction, at times ignoring them, often doing the exact opposite of what you have asked. You can feel your own frustration rising while you see the other children's delight at his defiance. If you don't act quickly some of the children will use his model and you risk losing control...

### How do you respond?

**A** **Carrots and stickers** - talk to Daniel and set him a challenge. Each time he responds positively to an instruction you will give him a sticker, each time he responds negatively you will take one away.

**B** **Stop arguing and start agreeing** - try some redirection techniques to allow Daniel to feel like he is being listened to without getting his own way.

**C** **Try a little reverse psychology** - if Daniel disagrees with everything you ask him to do then surely asking him to do the opposite will work in your favour. This approach also has the advantage of reducing your stress levels and calming the atmosphere in the room.

### The consequences

**A** **Carrots and stickers** Daniel is excited with the prospect of earning stickers. So excited that he completely ignores your instruction to sit on the carpet. You find him deeply involved in dressing up and must now take a sticker away. The difficulty is that Daniel has nothing to give up. Rather than setting up a credit account for stickers you decide to let it go and look for an opportunity to catch him



doing the right thing. Daniel responds well to this and seems pleased to have earned three stickers by the end of the story.

The other children, however, are becoming disgruntled. Emily points out that it took her three years to earn just one sticker. A slight exaggeration, but you can see her point. As many of the children are in open rebellion, Daniel drifts away to the mirror to gaze at his collection of stickers. As you calm the other children Daniel skips back to the carpet ready for his next three stickers. As you look at the sad faces and your single sheet of stickers you realise that this was not the best-planned strategy.

### Talking behaviour

■ *Is it effective to give a reward for good behaviour and then take it away for poor behaviour?*

■ *Do children who are badly behaved need more stickers?*

■ *How do you make rewards fair to all the children?*

**B** **Stop arguing and start agreeing** Instead of trying to control

Daniel's response you concentrate on controlling your own response. You decide to try a couple of different techniques. In response to his incessant "No!" you calmly repeat the instruction, getting slower and quieter on each repetition. At first this works brilliantly, almost stopping him in his tracks. But after a while he realises what you are doing and decides to repeat your instructions with you. Changing tack, you decide to use agreement to divert his "No". You use, "I hear what you are saying", "I understand that you don't want to" and "Be that as it may", to convert his "No" to a "Maybe" and to a "Yes". Daniel now has nothing to fight against. Suddenly his refusals are having no affect, and everyone seems to be agreeing with him. He finds himself complying with instructions as his usual conversation patterns are disrupted. He gets his extra few seconds of attention and his chance to show the

# “Don't do that!”



When confronted by a child who delights in doing the opposite to what you ask, you must choose your response carefully, says **Paul Dix...**

other children that he is not afraid, but now he complies. You find that if you combine your verbal response with a kind touch on the arm, it becomes an irresistible new routine.

## Talking behaviour

■ *Is it not more effective to meet his behaviour head on and challenge it aggressively?*

■ *How can you ask Mum to try a different approach with him at home?*

■ *What place does positive and appropriate physical contact have in managing behaviour?*

## Try a little reverse psychology

It has always seemed tempting to try and gain his agreement by twisting the question to your advantage. With Jedi-like nerve (and absolutely no training) you decide to employ your amateur psychology in the field of battle. Seeing Daniel once again circling the sand play area you launch into, "Daniel, I insist that you play with the sand immediately". Predictably, Daniel dives straight into fort building with enthusiasm. "Thank you," he beams. It seems that your approach is doomed. Daniel, after all, enjoys disagreeing, but he likes getting his own way even more. Undeterred, you try again.

As Daniel begins sliding crayons across the floor in a magnificent technicolor version of shove ha'penny, you intervene. "Daniel, those are the crayons for younger children, I think you are too old for those". Whereupon Daniel grabs the felt pens and throws the lot on the floor like a rolling plastic rainbow. "Yes! You are right, miss," he says, with that famous smile. As parents appear at the door, you realise that you are going to have to explain to Daniel's mum why she might receive some, well, confusing reports about today's behavioural suggestions...

## Talking Behaviour

■ *Does reverse psychology (getting another person to do or say something by telling them the opposite of what is desired) work with young children?*

■ *Can tricking children into behaving well have a positive impact on their behaviour in the long term?*



## findoutmore

If you want to learn outstanding behaviour practice for yourself, have a look at Paul's Online Behaviour Management Course for early years and nursery nurses at [pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources](http://pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources). Join the conversation on Twitter @PivotalPaul

■ *What agreement could you have in place at home that complements what you are trying to achieve with Daniel in the nursery?*

## Which approach did you use?

### A YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Playable

Teaching children that a right can always correct a wrong can be confusing. Many children slowly get the idea that any bad behaviour can be made better with the smallest good gesture. There is no sense of proportion or fairness. Keep rewards and sanctions separate. It is entirely reasonable for a child to end the day with a sticker and a sanction. When you conflate rewards and sanctions children learn to play the system and not to develop their own self-discipline.

### B YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Beyond behaviour

Looking beyond the initial behaviours, you realise that a little bit of attention might just change the dynamic. Daniel wants to be heard, he wants to feel important and valued for what he says. Most people respond negatively to his first response and engage in a game of negative behaviour tennis (a game that Daniel has become particularly adept at). Your skill is in seeing through the first response, dealing calmly and intelligently with his reaction, and finding a new routine that is safe for everyone.

### C YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Too risky

Watching the *Star Wars* films back-to-back - qualify you in psychotherapy it does not. This is not a time for experimentation with the children, or to take risks with your dignity. The mixed messages that you send to the children are confusing and will erode the consistency that you are trying to create. Tricking children into behaving better might seem like magic dust. In truth, it does nothing to teach the child how to improve their future behaviour.

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