

Explaining (Reframing) Oppositional Behavior to Kids

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The evolving conversation around neurodiversity celebrates the unique minds and superpowers of neurodivergent profiles such as ADHD, Dyslexia, Autism, and more.

But what about the kids who struggle with explosive, disruptive, or oppositional behaviors?



Unfortunately, these uniquely wired minds are not described with the same empowering language as some other diagnoses. While a search for “famous people with ADHD” pulls up hundreds of lists of famous people celebrating their superpowers, “famous people with ODD*” has 0 such results – in fact, I only found negative stories.

So how do we help kids with big behaviors understand their brains in an empowered and positive way?

** Oppositional Defiant Disorder*

Reframing Bad Behavior

Kids who are referred to me for challenging behaviors – defiance, kicking, hitting, screaming, cursing, breaking things – may be described as callous, manipulative, mean, and intentional about their actions.

At the same time, when we dive into their history, I also hear descriptions like:

- Defenders of justice
- The first to stand up to bullies
- Loving

- Leaders
- Determined
- Creative
- Observant

How can both be true?

Kids with big feelings, big ideas, and strong convictions can grow up to be adults who question the status quo and change the world.

Dr. Ross Greene famously says, “Kids do well if they can.” When kids are not doing well, it’s because they lack the skills to do well.

In other words, kids with explosive, challenging behaviors are not manipulative, mean kids.

*They are kids who don’t yet have the **skills** to meet the expectations of their environment.*

When they can meet expectations, they do, and then we see loving, determined, defenders of justice.

But when they can’t, it’s likely because they are having difficulty with skills such as:

- Sensory processing
- Communication
- Social perception
- Managing big, intense feelings
- Executive functioning (i.e., planning and flexibility)

These terms help us begin to connect the behavior we see on the outside to what might be going on underneath, and how we might talk about it to the child.

5 Steps to Explaining Behavioral Challenges to Kids

I've been using the following 5 steps to help children understand their neurotype ("brain type") or diagnostic profile. This may involve using specific diagnostic terms, or other more descriptive words that will help kids understand their brains.

The steps include:

1. Identifying Strengths
2. Naming Challenges
3. Defining the Diagnosis
4. You're Not Alone!
5. Let's Make a Plan

Here's what it might sound like when explaining behavioral challenges to a child so they can understand their brain and get the supports they need.

Identifying Strengths



Kids with big feelings, big ideas, and strong convictions can grow up to be adults who change the world by questioning the status quo. They have the power to disrupt industries and forward the fight for social justice.

But when they are little, sometimes all we see is the “disrupt” and “fight.”

Identifying the important, positive forces in oppositional and explosive behaviors helps kids understand that their brains are not broken. In fact, there's some really important energy to harness in that amazing brain of theirs!

To start, I might say:

*"We learned that your brain is built in a way that makes a lot of things come easily. These are like the super-fast **highways** in your brain!"*

Here are some common strengths, or highways, I've found in kids with explosive and oppositional behaviors:

- A passion for fairness and justice
- Feeling things very strongly, including feelings of love and empathy for others
- Being perceptive and knowledgeable
- Taking in a lot of information at once
- Strong self-advocates
- Defending friends who are marginalized or bullied
- Leadership and determination

These strengths are not in spite of oppositional and explosive tendencies, they are the **benefits** of having this particular type of brain.

Naming (and Reframing) the Challenges

Challenging behaviors are challenging for the child as well. Children may feel out of control or ashamed of their responses to difficult situations.

I've found that reframing the challenges as **skills the child is building** can be empowering for the child, as well as helpful for parents and educators to see what the child needs help with.

In other words, there's nothing wrong with big feelings, ideas, and conviction, but kids may need some help learning how to regulate those emotions, problem-solve, and express their thoughts and ideas effectively.



To introduce the challenges, I will typically say:

*"We also found some things that were tricky. These are your **construction zones**, or the skills your brain is working to build."*

Here are some examples of the ways I've described "construction zones" to kids with behavioral challenges to emphasize the skills we will be helping them build:

- "It may be hard to **express your needs** in a way that others can understand."
- "Sometimes your **senses can get overwhelmed**, like when things are too loud, too crowded, or happening too fast."
- "Your body may **react too quickly**, before you've had a chance to make a decision about what you want to do."
- "It may be **hard to notice** when you're starting to feel annoyed, frustrated, or even hungry."
- "It can be **hard to shift** to a different plan when things don't go like you thought."

Defining the Diagnosis



Finding the right diagnosis for a child with explosive or oppositional behaviors is tricky.

First, we often don't yet know the reason behind a child's behavioral challenges. **Behavior is a symptom of the problem – not the problem itself.**

Second, their profile may be emerging and shifting as they develop, so the diagnosis may change over time.

Third, when the primary challenge is challenging behavior, our diagnostic options are limited, especially for insurance or gaining access to services. Often children may be diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, or they may qualify for an IEP under the category of Emotional Disturbance.

So how do we explain something like ODD, IED, DMDD, or ED to a child?

Personally, I don't.

While these terms may be helpful in some cases for getting access to treatment or services, I don't find them helpful when talking to the child.

*Instead, I focus on what's underneath the behaviors: **the skills the child is building and the problems they are trying to solve****.

*See Dr. [Ross Greene](#)

Once I've identified and named the skills and problems a child is working on, it becomes much easier to frame their profile in a positive and empowering way. It may sound something like:

*"It turns out, many people have highways and construction zones just like yours. You're not alone! When we see this pattern, we have some **helpful words** to describe what's going on."*

Here are a few of the "helpful words" I've used to describe testing results directly to kids without referencing a specific diagnosis:

- **Sensory processing:** "Your brain is built in a way that takes in a lot of information at once. Sometimes your brain has a hard time knowing what to do with all that information, and it may come out as some pretty strong reactions."
- **Communication skills:** "We learned that your brain likes asking questions and doesn't take 'just because' as an answer – just like all the great change-makers! Sometimes it can be tricky to figure out how to question the status quo in a way that others can hear you."
- **Managing anxiety:** "Your brain is very protective and wants to make sure you check out anything that could be scary or dangerous. This is really good for making sure you are safe. It also means that your brain may tell you something is a threat when it's not, flipping on a 'fight' response."

- **Gear-shifting:** “Your brain is built in a way that gives you incredible determination! Though once you’re on a path, it can be hard to shift gears if time is up or something is not working like you thought it would.”
- **Flexibility:** “Your brain is highly attuned to justice and fairness, which makes you a champion for others! At the same time, it may be really challenging when the rules change or don’t seem fair.”
- **Controlling impulses:** “Your brain is built with a drive to follow your passions. This means you’re not afraid to take risks to try something new! It may also mean it’s hard to put on the breaks when you’re feeling big feelings like anger or frustration.”

Now we can figure out how to build these skills and solve the specific problems that are behind their challenging behaviors.

You’re Not Alone!

Driven, creative, and innovative people tend to have big, fiery feelings with equally big, explosive reactions. Those who succeed find ways to navigate difficult situations by developing a better understanding of their emotions and reactions.



Here are a few resources to help. Click the links below or scan the QR code for the [complete list](#) of resources:

- [Why Do We Lose Control Over Our Emotions](#): This video explains what happens when big feelings take over, including the concept of “flipping your lid.”
- [Mindfulness for Kids](#): Kids talking about what anger feels like, and how to use mindfulness to recognize and process big feelings.
- [Anger and ADHD](#): Many children with big behaviors also have a diagnosis of ADHD. Jessica McCabe does a great job breaking down challenges with behavioral and emotional regulation. View all her emotional regulation videos [here](#).



It's important to remember that big feelings lead to big actions that change the world.

We don't want to turn off our kids' ability to recognize and feel injustice or anger – in fact, helping them “turn up” their voice is one way to turn opposition and disruption into powerful forces for change.

When you're young, it's hard to know what to do with these strong forces – but we can help!

Let's Make a Plan!



Now that we have identified the child's important strengths and we've named the obstacles getting in their way, we can make a plan to help them maximize their amazingness and have choice and control over how they express themselves.

Here are a few recommendations I've used with kids with this profile:

- **Activism and leadership:** "Your strong sense of fairness and justice would be a really powerful addition to the student government."
- **Occupational therapy:** "You're going to start working with someone who's an expert on helping kids with really powerful sensory systems."
- **Counseling:** "It might be helpful to work with a therapist to help you and your parents communicate better when you're feeling upset, frustrated, or when things feel unfair."
- **Social stories and role-plays:** "I've noticed that shifting gears right after recess can be challenging. Let's figure out what makes that hard and practice some solutions!"
- **Mindfulness:** "We're going to learn some strategies for being more aware of your body and reactions when you're taking in so much information. This could give you more choice in the moment."

- **Positive self-talk:** “Many athletes, artists, and performers have mantras or things they say to themselves when frustrating things happen. What’s yours?”
- **Problem-solving:** “I gave your parents some tips on how to help everyone figure out some better strategies when you’re having a hard time. After a tough experience, they may ask you to help them understand what happened and try to come up with some solutions together.”

In this way, the child becomes a more active participant in their intervention because **they know exactly why it’s happening**. This is especially important for anxious children who benefit from knowing the “why.”

I hope this has been helpful to your child and their amazing brain! For more helpful articles like this, please visit www.ExplainingBrains.com/Parents .