

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #147: “Defiance” and ADHD: Getting Curious About What’s Beneath the Surface

Katie: Defiance is often really just the surface level, and it's not really getting to the root of what's going on.

Lori: And the truth is that defiance is often a symptom of something deeper for our kids.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: I once worked with a family who was frustrated over their ADHD child's Jekyll and Hyde personality. Most of the time, their child was a sweet, happy kid, but at the smallest request, he could flip to an hour-long meltdown. After walking on eggshells for years, the whole family was super stressed, and his parents found themselves arguing constantly about how to best discipline him.

Katie: If you can relate to this family's situation, you are not alone.

Lori: That's why we created our online course, *Creating Calm*, to give you practical strategies to address challenging behaviors that are incredibly common in ADHD.

Mallory: And as a bonus, these tools will help the whole family get on the same page so there's less arguing in your home.

Katie: Here's what Kate had to say after taking the course: "Creating calm has helped me really understand ADHD and given me so many practical tools to support my son and make our days not such a battle. I've read so many books, but they just didn't give real life examples and tools. This course has been so worth the investment and something I'll keep coming back to revisit."

Lori: A year from now, you're going to wish you had started today. Head to thechildhoodcollective.com/yes and enter the exclusive code **PODCAST** to get 10% off our course when you enroll today. You can also grab the link and code in the show notes.

Mallory: You may be feeling like a lot of days are opposite day in your home. You know, you tell your ADHDer to go out and they go in, you tell them to stop and they go. Or you tell them to start their homework and they look at you blankly as they switch on the tv.

Katie: Oh my gosh, it can be so frustrating. And the term that a lot of people use for this is defiance, right? And I'm using air quotes here because that's a tricky word and we're going to dive into it a little bit more. But it can feel really hard when our kids go directly against our directions or what we're asking them to do.

Lori: For sure. And on top of all of that, the defiance may be making you question whether you're even a good parent.

Mallory: If any of this resonates with you, we want you to know that you're not alone. Defiance is one of the most common challenges faced by parents and teachers of kids with ADHD. We get DMs, questions about it all the time.

Katie: Absolutely. And the reason that I was using air quotes around the word defiance earlier is because defiance is often really just the surface level and it's not really getting to the root of what's going on.

Lori: Exactly. And the truth is that defiance is often a symptom of something deeper for our kids. So today we're going to be digging into a few other explanations for why your child may seem defiant.

Katie: Perfect. So the first one that comes up a lot for kids with ADHD is differences in executive functioning. And this is sometimes such a broad term that we use, but when we break down what those executive functioning skills are, things like making a plan in your mind and figuring out the steps to carry it out and then being able to avoid every possible distraction. And when we look at executive functioning, we can really start to see why certain tasks become difficult for our kids. And it can look really defiant. Like, for example, you ask your kid, hey, go clean up your room, it's pretty messy. And then 15 minutes later, you walk in their room and they haven't done anything. If anything, it might be worse than before they started. Okay, I know that you guys can relate to this.

Lori: Yeah, I was going to say, my daughter's in this phase where when I ask her to do something, she goes, I'm good.

Katie: Oh, my gosh.

Lori: It's not saying no, but it is so much more frustrating to my husband and I to say "I'm good".

Katie: That's hilarious. Thanks, mom. I've considered your possibility, and I'm good. Yeah, don't need any of that cleaning today. And it's really tough. And we might walk into their room and be like, oh, my gosh, right. Like smoke is coming out of my ears because I asked you to clean it. It's been 15 minutes. I won't even tell you all the things I accomplished in those 15 minutes, but now you're sitting here playing with dinosaurs. And what we have to do here is break down, are they really being quote unquote defiant or did something get lost in the translation? For example, maybe they walked in their room and they felt completely overwhelmed by the task and they didn't really know where to start. Again, executive functioning, being able to break that task down. And so instead they just shifted to something else that seemed more interesting and rewarding to their brain. Right. This is not saying that it's fine and we should never make our kids clean their room. Totally not saying that. But as a parent, when we know, hey, this is looking more like an executive functioning issue. One, we can reframe it and not be so frustrated. And two, we can start to be really curious about how to actually support. So maybe you break the room into zones and you say, we're just going to work on getting the dirty laundry off the floor, or we're just going to focus on your bed and you can teach your kid to do this. This is not like you running the circus all the time, but more like, we're going to teach you how to break things down into easier steps. And another great

example that we were just talking about before we started recording is showers and baths for our kids. And so often I say to my kids, especially my younger one, I'm like, okay, you got to go get in the shower. And he's a boy and he can be genuinely stinky. I mean, he's only seven, but I feel like there's like a physical need we have to get clean. And I even think he might notice hopefully that's happening. And he, will, just do anything to get out of showering. And again, I can start to be really frustrated. My husband and I are like, what's wrong with him? He won't get in the shower! But when we really break it down, I really think that he is not clear on what that's going to look like. As crazy as that sounds, we do it every other day. We take showers. This is a regular occasion in my house, I promise. But it can feel like to him, like we're starting over. I don't know what that's going to look like. I can't remember that. I actually really like the shower and I just feel so overwhelmed at the idea of getting into the shower. And again, when I reframe that, it doesn't feel quite so personally insulting. It's more like, okay, what's the issue here? And how can we help support him?

Lori: Yeah, my kids are the same way. Transitioning into the bath and shower, it's so hard and I think for us, a lot of times we're transitioning from doing a fun family game or they're playing with each other. And so it's usually like going from a preferred activity into something that's not preferred, even though once they get in there, they love it. It's that transitioning that can be really hard for kids.

Mallory: Absolutely. I think that's a huge reason that we see defiance from kids with ADHD is because of the struggle with transitioning, which often does come down to the differences in the executive functioning. They have a hard time remembering seeing the future and the past. They're living in the now. They have a hard time remembering that, oh, I actually really do like to shower. It's very enjoyable. And then they have a hard time seeing the future about like, oh, it didn't really take that long last time. And actually, last time I showered, it only took five minutes. It's not like this huge task. So kids with ADHD struggle with these transitions. And again, that's not because they want to be naughty and defiant. A lot of times it comes down to those differences in their executive functioning.

Lori: And I think when I talk to a lot of families as we're talking about these situations, they're saying, my child's being defiant when I ask them to do something, right. And I can give a personal example of, like, we were taking a bath last night, and I'm giving my kids directions, and they're, like, fighting with each other and playing with each other. They

literally did not hear anything that I just said. And so sometimes when I talk with families and we kind of really dig into it a little deeper, a lot of times their kids, they might think that they're hearing them, but they're not even hearing the direction, right. Like, they're not even attending to or, paying attention to it. So reframing it as a parent, as it's not being defiant, but they struggle to regulate their attention and listen to instructions when they're in the midst of doing something fun. So a lot of times it looks like they're not doing what you're asking, but they're not even attending to you. They don't even hear your instruction.

Katie: Definitely. And I think that's such an important reframe for parents. And like Mallory always says, we don't want to just admire the problem, right, and identify what's the issue, but we want to be really strategic about what can we do. And so for this particular bullet point, the main strategy is that when we understand where our child is at in their executive functioning, then we can break things down or adjust the way that we're giving instructions. For example, in the bathtub, Lori, you might pause and get everyone's attention and then give just like one instruction at a time. Right? But again, that's going to look a little different depending on your child and their developmental level and how many kids are involved in that situation. And so we can't necessarily give you a specific script, but the questions that you can ask yourself are things like, am I setting expectations that really match where my child is at? And if they're not doing what I'm asking them, is there a gap there? And if there is, what can I do to address that and support them through that?

Lori: For my kids, the last thing they want to do when they get home from school is homework.

Katie: Totally and the last thing I want to do after a long day of work is deal with the stress of meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up the kitchen.

Lori: Same here. We tried Hungryroot grocery service to help us eat balanced meals while saving time and money every week. It's been a game changer for our weekly meals and snacks, and I love that you can customize groceries based on your kids or your family's dietary restrictions.

Katie: Yes! My husband eats gluten free and I love that I can customize groceries based on our family's needs. And not only can I get complete meals delivered, but I can also order my

weekly groceries through them. And I'm always amazed at how my kids will try new things just because they came out of our Hungryroot box.

Lori: Yes! It's easy to customize your box each week and you can skip weeks whenever you want. For a limited time, Hungryroot is offering our listeners 40% off your first box, which is amazing. Just be sure to use the code: CHILDHOODCOLLECTIVE40 so you can get the discount.

Katie: We also have the link and the code in the show notes, so you can try Hungryroot today.

Lori: Over the past year, my oldest has really struggled with anxiety, especially at night. As soon as it was time for sleep, she'd be crying for me to stay and worrying about all the things. I was talking to another therapist about our bedtime battles and she said the Zenimal, a screen free meditation device, had been a game changer for her daughter with ADHD and anxiety. I immediately purchased the Zenimal and can confidently say it was the best tool to help my daughter get better sleep. She was able to fall asleep an hour earlier using it.

Katie: Yes, it's actually really helped my kids to be able to calm their busy bodies at night.

Mallory: What we love about the Zenimal is that it combines two of our favorite bedtime recommendations, using a relaxation strategy and removing screens from the bedroom.

Katie: The Zenimal is an adorable screen free turtle with nine guided meditations your kids can choose from. And our absolute favorite part of the Zenimal is that every meditation ends with the most important message, 'you're a good kid.'

Lori: To grab your own Zenimal and get your child and yourself some better sleep, head to [Zenimals.com](https://zenimals.com) and use our code: TCC for a discount. You can also find the link in the show notes.

Mallory: Our next deeper reason for defiance is kind of along these same lines as executive functioning differences, and it's learning differences. And a lot of this deeper reason can show up at school, but it can also show up at home during homework time. You know as child psychologists Lori and I hear all the time these kids being labeled lazy, defiant, only to do their psychoeducational evaluation and discover that the child actually has dyslexia or

some other kind of learning difference. And again, this is like a huge deeper reason they're struggling to learn. So, for example, in the classroom, a child might look defiant if you're going around doing popcorn reading and it's this child's turn to read out loud and they refuse to do it. The teacher is frustrated, it's your turn, read. But they don't know how to do the task. Or maybe they can do it, but they're scared that they're going to mess up because they've learned that this is hard for them, and they're scared of being made fun of because they can't read their passage.

Katie: Can we just take a moment for popcorn reading? Popcorn reading was the worst. I remember thinking ahead and I would get so lost in the text because I would literally be like, okay, there's six people in front of me. How many sentences do I. And I would try to count, and I would try to like. And I was actually not a bad reader, so I don't know where that anxiety came from. But when you said popcorn reading just now, I got a little bit of, like, a visceral reaction of like, oh, no, not popcorn reading! Ugh, it's the worst.

Lori: I was the kid that was not paying attention, and then they'd be like, calling my name and I'd be like, what's going on? What are we doing? Where are we at? Wait! This was like in graduate school, not in elementary school.

Mallory: Do you think our listeners know what popcorn reading is? Popcorn reading is just when maybe you're reading a chapter from a book and everyone's reading a small portion of it. They read a paragraph, they read two sentences, and then it's on to the next person. If you're not familiar with what popcorn reading is, there's probably other names for it.

Katie: If you grew up in the 90s, you're familiar and you probably have small trauma about it because oh, my gosh. But back to the point is that for some of our kids who are resistant, in Lori's case, maybe there was an executive functioning issue of paying attention. But some of our kids might really be having a difficulty with reading, and so it looks like they're going to put their head down and refuse. And a teacher might be, like, taking that very personally, but in reality, they're letting us know in not as positive of a way that this is actually really hard for them.

Lori: Yeah, I had a kiddo in my office the other day and he had to do a reading fluency test, and so he had to read a paragraph. And, reading is just very hard for him. And we got to it and he immediately was like, no. And it was honestly heartbreaking. But he's like, my brain

is broken. My brain is broken. And he tore up the papers that we had and was just really frustrated. I knew he could do it because he had just read a little bit, so it wasn't like, this is too hard for him to do, but it was hard. And he was going to make a lot of mistakes. He just was, because it was a challenging task for him. And we just took a break. He calmed down and he was able to go back to it. But it was legitimately, it took a lot of focus for a kid with ADHD, where it's hard to do a non-preferred task anyway. It's hard to initiate something that takes a lot of effort and then learning and reading takes a lot of effort that can feel so overwhelming for them. And so was he, quote unquote defiant? Yes. But was there a reason behind it? Yes, there was a lot of stress and frustration because that task was really hard for him and he just needed, some encouragement and he needed a break to kind of reset.

Mallory: Absolutely. And learning differences are one of the most commonly co-occurring diagnoses with ADHD. So this is something that a lot of you listeners can probably relate to. A lot of our kids with ADHD do struggle with academics, not just because of the ADHD, but because of a learning difference. And this will not just show up in the classroom. But you probably are experiencing the difficulties of this at home too. When you're trying to do homework. Your kid is putting in so much effort at school all day. The work is not matched to their current learning level. And then they get sent home with what they didn't finish at school or they're sent home with the homework that, again, they still don't understand how to do, and they're just going to start to refuse to do homework. So in this situation, if you feel like maybe your child does have a learning difference, it's really important to get an evaluation and determine whether there really is that underlying, deeper explanation for the struggle that you're seeing. And a great place to start with that is by talking with your child's school, to start the process, perhaps, of evaluating for something like dyslexia.

Lori: And, the third explanation, is something that I see a lot, again, as a child psychologist, is anxiety looking like defiance and aggression. So this is really common. I remember I had a girl in the past who she had a lot of fear around separating from a caregiver. And anytime she would go to school, she did not want to go into the school. So if you have kids who have a lot of school refusal, you're going to see defiance. And for anxiety, when we all feel anxiety, our initial response to that is to avoid. And avoidance is what actually grows our anxiety. But that avoidance looks like, quote unquote defiance. And this girl had had bullying at her school. She had a combo of bullying, learning challenges, and fears about her caregiver dying and

her being alone. And so if she was separated, she couldn't kind of keep her eye on the caregiver.

Katie: It just breaks my heart to hear that. I just feel like our kids face enough at school and to carry that fear around all day. Like, as someone who has dealt with a lot of anxiety, I don't know, that's so hard.

Lori: Yeah. But, for people who looked at that situation, this is what it looked like. It looked like her refusing to get out of the car. She would get out of the car and literally tear up the front office, pulling things off of shelves. Her body was in massive fight or flight and she wanted out of there. She would run away from the school. And in this situation, after talking to her again, she had fears that her caregiver was going to die, get in an accident. And the only way to avoid that was to be with her all the time. Right? And so if you think about that, there were so many other issues going on at school, too. If you really think about that, that's a terrifying thought. And to us, looking at that, well, that's not rational. But in her mind, that was actually going to happen and her panic alarms were going off. She was in fight or flight, and she was fighting and fleeing. Right. So a lot of times we look at those behaviors it's just an aggressive child. It's an angry child, and if we treat it like it's just anger or aggression, we're never going to fully address that. Right. Mallory knows if you are treating anxiety in the office, you have to get to the root of what is causing that anxiety or you're never going to fully address those behaviors that you're seeing. Right. So our go to tip and we have a whole episode I think we can link on anxiety and talking to your child about anxiety, that's going to help you give some language to that. And talk about kind of, I always talk about my daughter's worry bully. That's what she calls it, my worry bully. And what is your worry bully telling you when you're going to school? And sometimes you can really get a better idea of what those worry thoughts are. I always with kids, when I'm working with them, either interviewing them about their worries or their behaviors, or I'm working with them in therapy, is using like a zero to five scale or a zero to ten scale. If they're a little older and say, zero is, I'm totally calm and ten is like, I'm feeling so scared, I just have to get out of the situation. It's the worst thing ever. Having kids kind of rate their worries on a scale and that can really help us understand oh, when I go to school, I'm at a nine or a ten. Well, that tells me that child can't cope in that moment. Whereas if I met home, I'm at a five or a six. When I get to school and I get over that hump and I get in the classroom, a lot of times it goes down

and then I'm at a three. So using kind of like numbers to help assess that can give us a sense, too, of where their emotions are in different situations.

Katie: Yeah. Another thing that was great in that anxiety episode, and I highly recommend if you're listening and you're like, oh, my gosh, I think my child is displaying anxiety. We talked a lot, Lori talked specifically about when to seek professional treatment for anxiety versus the types of anxiety that you can address more at home, or at least that's like a good place to start. Right. And so the child that you spoke about who's going into the classroom destroying...

Lori: Absolutely professional.

Katie: Yes. If furniture is breaking, right, that's definitely, that's your sign. But I think we talked more nuanced about that and when parents could seek help and what that might look like again, people think like, oh, I'm going to be doing therapy forever or something. But anxiety treatment is very systematic and can be really helpful. It also gives you tools as a parent. So that episode is kind of more of a deep dive. And like I said, like you said, we'll link that in the show notes for families that need more tools there, because that is a big one and I think it can feel really daunting. So there's hopefully a little more clarity with that episode.

Mallory: Yup. So our fourth kind of deeper possible explanation for the surface level defiance that you're observing is that your child with ADHD is stuck in a pattern of correction after correction or punishment after punishment. So put yourself in their shoes for a minute. Let's say you just spent the whole day doing laundry, cleaning up the house, helping the kids do their homework, the most dreaded thing ever. And then your partner comes home and complains that the dishes are piled up in the sink. They don't pay any attention to the fact that you haven't sat down all day. I don't know about you, but if that were me, I would become defensive and probably irritated and probably a little defiant.

Katie: And very unlikely to actually clean those dishes.

Mallory: Exactly. So you don't notice all of the great things that I just did, but the one thing you queue into is that the dishes aren't done. And the sad truth is that this is a pattern that a lot of our kids with ADHD fall into. And we actually have research showing that kids that have challenging behavior get corrected on their behavior at much higher rates than their

typical peers. And as you can imagine, if the only feedback you're getting is negative feedback, you're going to lose your motivation to do those good things and you're going to lose your motivation to be a good listener and to be cooperative. And it's just a sad place for a lot of our kids, but it's where they are. And if you're feeling like, that's where I am with my kid, our only interactions are negative. I'm constantly correcting. I want you to know that you're not alone. And there are times where I fall into that cycle in my own house and I'll notice. Gosh, this last week with my kids has just been so hard, and I feel like we haven't had a lot of high moments, but I've been doing so much correction after correction. It's an easy pattern to fall into. So if you're feeling stuck in that pattern, the first thing that we want you to do is catch them getting it right. Catch your child doing those good things. So your partner comes home and they notice that you did all the laundry, and they noticed that you cleaned the whole house. And they noticed that the kids backpacks are ready for tomorrow when the homework is done. And they acknowledge you for that. They acknowledge your hard work. We want to do the same thing for our kids. Even just those little moments where normally we would just gloss past it. Oh, thanks so much for putting your shoes where they belong instead of leaving them right at the front door. Or I noticed that you hung up your backpack where it belongs. That really helps me out. Thank you. Just noticing those little things that maybe we would typically gloss over, because it's just we expect them to do it, start noticing those little things that they're getting it right when they're doing a great job. So we can start to really outnumber those times where we're having to provide corrections or redirections. And also, never a bad idea is trying to increase that positive time with your child. Even just ten minutes a day can go a really long way for kind of breaking that cycle of correction after correction to just have that child led time. They choose what you're doing. It's a time free from corrections, where they're leading the interaction and you're just having fun.

Katie: Absolutely. I think one of the things that can be really helpful, too, for building that executive functioning is when you catch them doing something right, you can actually tie it to the positive outcome. So, wow, that was awesome, you put your backpack where it goes. That means tomorrow you're going to know where your backpack is. And anytime that we can connect it back to that cause and effect, it's so helpful for our kids because, again, like we said, they live in the moment often and aren't really thinking about tomorrow's backpack. Like, that is a problem for future Katie to manage. And I do it, too. Okay. This is why I'm always on stories going, I don't know why I scheduled three appointments in the same day, because in my mind, my future self was going to be fine with that. And then I get there and

I'm like, this is the worst. But what we can help our kids do is vocalize and verbalize. Okay. Wow, that was awesome, you actually brushed your teeth. And now that means that you get more book time. Or I love how you picked up your room and did you see how fast you were able to find the thing you were looking for? That's because you put all your stuff away, like, amazing. So kind of just helping them connect it back so that it's not necessarily so much like, hey, I really like you, and I think you did a good job, which is awesome, but also, you really like you, and you did a great job for your future self, and that's awesome in and of itself because that's really their inner voice.

Lori: Yeah. And I think, again, part of giving that positive feedback, or a lot of the reason for that positive feedback is to teach our kids skills. We're really trying to use that feedback to teach those are teaching opportunities and giving them positive feedback. And I know there are many families who are listening, and I know I talked to many families where they're feeling like there isn't a positive thing to comment on. And I know that that's not the case. And there are going to be things that your child does throughout the day. Even getting ready and going to school, you might have to give a lot of reminders or assistance., that's okay. Your child might not be there to be able to do some of those things independently. Even if you have to hand over hand walk your child to the shoe area and show them where it's at and you help them with it, you can still be like, great job. Even if you're helping with those behaviors, and doing those things, just like Katie said, teaching. See, we're going to put these here and now we're going to know where it is tomorrow. So even if they aren't doing it on their own and you have to assist them with that, that's okay. You can still give them that positive feedback.

Katie: Absolutely. And so we want to just acknowledge, too, that the things we've talked about today are four of the most common things that we see parents overlooking. So when we see kids that are really struggling and parents feel like they're being so defiant, these are often the core reasons. And so we really wanted to talk about that. But we also want to acknowledge that for some kids with ADHD, there's just joy in the argument. And this is why they can make such great lawyers. But I know that in my own family growing up, I would argue with my parents all the time and it wasn't because I didn't love my parents. I was not a bad kid in any sense of the word, but I would just want to fight with them because it felt really good to make my point and I really wanted to be understood. I really wanted them to understand my perspective. And I know that as parents, we can find ourselves in a similar

cycle with our own kids. Like, I tell my son it's time to get in the shower and he immediately wants to negotiate with me. No, you said yesterday I did. And why do I have to do that, mom? Just tell me why. Why do I have to get in the shower? And I've gone through many different strategies as a parent. I've tried negotiating with him, explaining myself, giving kind of like a consequence or a threatening warning. And what I've really found is the most effective is in these non-negotiable situations, like, you need to take a shower I might give a choice, right? I might say, do you want to shower first or do you want to eat your snack first? Or something like that, and give him the option. But ultimately, if I say it is time to get in the shower, we are going to family photos or your piano recital and you have to take a shower at that point I've told him what the expectation is, and I really don't want to get sucked into the argument. And sometimes that can feel really hard, especially in the world of gentle parenting and connected parenting, because we feel like every question needs an answer and every protest needs a response, right? But really, at the heart of it is, Buddy, it's time to take a shower. As soon as you get out, you can have all of your balls and your dinosaurs. I'm going to set the timer. Let's do it. And while he's protesting and telling me, no, I don't want to, please, no. I know as a parent that my child needs to be clean. I also know that once he gets in, he's going to be absolutely fine. And he's probably going to fight me to get out, if we're honest. So as a parent, it's my job to set that boundary, and we really encourage you as parents to do the same and to feel confident to say, no, this is what we're doing. And I've already given you my reasons or my expectation, and I'm not going to fight with you. And it can really kind of reduce some of that noise that we hear as parents. And again, it can feel weird to step into that authority and into that power, but you can absolutely do that.

Mallory: Absolutely. So our key takeaway for today is that, as we always say, kids with ADHD want to do well. They don't want to be naughty. They don't want to be constantly in trouble. They don't want to be “defiant”. So if we take some time to really dig deeper into the defiance, we might be surprised by the explanation that we find for that surface level challenge. And of course, as always, giving each other a whole lot of grace in this process.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!