

Is My Child Being Defiant—or Struggling With Executive Functioning?

Practical guidance for understanding what may be happening underneath behavior and helping families move forward.

“Put your shoes on.” Five minutes later, no shoes. “I already told you to clean your room.” Nothing. “Please start your homework.” Your child suddenly needs water, cannot find a pencil, remembers something upstairs, and somehow ends up playing with the dog.

It can look like defiance. Sometimes it is resistance. But sometimes the child is struggling with the executive-function skills required to carry out the request.

Behavior Is the Part We See

Consider the instruction “Clean your room.” An adult may hear one task. A child with executive-function difficulties may face dozens of decisions: Where do I start? What do I pick up first? Where does this go? How long will this take? What if I get distracted?

The child may know the room needs cleaning while still struggling to organize and initiate the process.

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Look for the Pattern

Ask whether your child can do the task when motivated, calm, supported, and reminded, but struggles when expected to initiate it independently. That pattern may point toward a skill deficit rather than simple unwillingness.

Replace “Do It” With Structure

Instead of “Clean your room,” make the invisible steps visible: put dirty clothes in the hamper; take dishes to the kitchen; put toys in bins; put books on the shelf; make the bed.

You are not necessarily lowering the expectation. You are making the pathway to success clearer.

ETHOS SHORELINE REFLECTION

Before assuming “won’t,” investigate “can’t yet.” Children still need accountability, but accountability works better when expectations match the skills required to meet them.

Related Ethos Shoreline pathway: Chaos to Consistency™



A Note for Parents

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what is happening underneath it. Ethos Shoreline resources are designed to help families build practical structure while protecting connection, responsibility, and belonging.

Educational Disclaimer: This resource is for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, educational, or emergency services. Consider consulting an appropriately qualified professional when concerns are persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or creating safety concerns.

