



When a Child Refuses: How to Respond Without Turning It Into a Power Struggle

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Helping children work through frustration, learn to communicate, and build the confidence to do difficult things.

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One of the hardest moments for parents, teachers, and therapists is when a child simply refuses.

You ask a child to complete a worksheet, join a group activity, clean up toys, or finish a coloring page. The child says no. Maybe they push the materials away, throw something on the floor, start crying, or become aggressive.

What do you do? Insist? Offer a break? Give choices? Try to calm them down? And how do you know whether you're helping the child or accidentally making things harder?

I was recently talking with a therapist about this very question. She told me that when a child begins refusing, her mind immediately jumps ahead. Could this turn into aggression? Could the child run? Could someone get hurt?



Those are reasonable concerns, and safety always matters. But I encouraged her to hold one more question alongside them:

What is the child learning from the way we respond?

Start by Asking Why

Let's imagine a boy who doesn't want to color. We give him a coloring page, and he pushes it away. Maybe he tears it or throws it on the floor.

It's tempting to conclude, "He just doesn't want to do what he's told." Maybe that's part of it. But let's think a little more carefully.

What if coloring has always been hard for him? What if he struggles with fine motor skills, or with staying inside the lines? What if adults have corrected him over and over: "You're outside the lines." "That's not how you do it." "Do it again."

I don't know that any of that has happened to him. I also don't know that it hasn't. If coloring has become connected with frustration or embarrassment, it makes sense that he'd want to avoid it.

Refusal can come from many places. The task may be too difficult. The child may not understand what we're asking, or may not yet have a reliable way to tell us what they need. The room may be too loud, too bright, or too busy. Past experiences with similar tasks may have been unpleasant. Or the child may simply prefer to do something else.

We usually can't tell which of these is happening just by watching one moment. For behavior professionals, sorting this out is the purpose of assessment. For parents and teachers, it means staying curious, noticing patterns, and talking with the people who support the child before deciding what the refusal "means."

Understanding why a task is hard doesn't automatically mean removing it. It means we can make better decisions about how to teach it.

Preferences Are Normal. Unsafe Behavior Is Something We Teach Around.

Not wanting to do something isn't a character flaw.

If I asked whether you'd rather be at work right now or relaxing on a beach, you might pick the beach. That doesn't make you irresponsible. It just means you have preferences.

Children have preferences too. A child who would rather play with cars than finish a worksheet isn't necessarily being defiant.

It's okay for a child to say, "I don't want to do this." It's okay to be frustrated, to ask for help, or to ask for a break. We can accept and respect that communication.

Accepting a child's communication is different from permitting unsafe behavior. Throwing materials, hurting someone, or destroying property aren't ways we want children to handle hard feelings. That's where teaching comes in.

Responding in the Moment

Back to our coloring example. The paper is on the floor, and the boy is clearly upset.

I might pick up the paper and ask, "Hey, what are you feeling right now?" Then I listen.

Maybe he says, "I don't want to color."

I understand that. I might respond:

"I know you don't want to color right now. That's okay. I want you to be kind to my papers, though, and keep them in one piece. So we're not going to tear them."

I'm not criticizing him for being upset. I'm acknowledging how he feels while setting a clear, reasonable expectation about how we treat materials.

Then I might add: "We don't have to start right away. Tell me how you're feeling."

Sometimes what a child needs most is an adult who can stay with them in a hard moment without adding fuel to it.

One of My Favorite Phrases: "I Can Wait"

One of my favorite things to say to a struggling child is simply: "I can wait."

I don't want a power struggle. Even when I've decided an activity is important and appropriate, it rarely needs to happen this instant. I can give the child time. I can let them be frustrated for a little while. I can sit nearby while they work through it.

"If you need a little time, that's okay. I can wait."

Children are still developing the ability to manage strong emotions on their own, and many need an adult's help to settle. This is often called co-regulation. In practical terms, it can look like a calm voice, fewer words, a little space or a little closeness depending on what the child prefers, and a predictable adult who isn't escalating. It doesn't work the same way for every child or every moment, and some children need something quite different, but our own calm usually gives us the best chance of helping.

Staying calm also helps *us* make better decisions. Sometimes the right call is to help the child complete the activity. Sometimes it's to make the task easier, offer a different way to participate, postpone it, or recognize that insisting on it isn't appropriate right now.

When Escape Is Part of the Pattern

Here's one pattern worth understanding, though it's only one possibility among many.

An adult asks a child to color. The child throws the paper. The adult says, "Fine, you don't have to color," and the activity ends.

If throwing the paper reliably ends unpleasant tasks, the child may become more likely to throw materials in similar situations. In behavior analysis, this is called negative reinforcement: something unpleasant is



removed after a behavior, and that can make the behavior more likely to happen again.

That doesn't mean every refusal works this way, and it doesn't mean we should push through every task a child resists. Sometimes the task really is too hard. Sometimes the child is overwhelmed or communicating a legitimate need we should respect. Determining whether escape is actually maintaining a behavior takes careful observation and, for persistent or serious concerns, a proper assessment by a qualified professional.

When escape *is* part of the picture, the answer usually isn't simply to hold firm. It's to teach the child a better way to request a break, ask for help, or negotiate, and then make sure those requests actually work.

Teach Children What to Say Instead

What would I rather the boy do than throw the paper? He could say:

- "I don't want to do this right now."
- "I need some space, please."
- "Can I have two minutes?"
- "Can you help me?"
- "This is too hard."
- "Can we do it later?"

These are skills we can teach. For a child who speaks, we can model the words and practice them during calm moments. For a child who uses pictures, signs, or an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device, we can teach the same messages within that system.

When a child uses one of these skills, we respond. Sometimes we honor the request right away. Sometimes we explain that something still needs to happen and look for a middle ground:

"You don't want to color the whole picture? Okay. How about we color just this one part together?"

"You need a break? Sure. Let's take a break and then come back and try again."

We want children to keep their ability to say no while learning to say it in ways that work for them and for the people around them.

Kind and Clear: Holding a Reasonable Expectation

You don't have to choose between kindness and expectations. You can have both.

Let's say the boy has had time to settle. We've talked about how he feels, acknowledged that coloring is hard, offered help, and decided that coloring one small section is a reasonable expectation for him today.

"Are you ready to try this now?"

"No."

"Okay. I can wait."

A little later I might try again: "I'm going to put this paper back on the table. Are you going to swipe it off?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll wait then."

After another moment: "Are you going to swipe this off the table?"

"No."

"Are you going to color on it?"

"Yes."

"All right. Here's the crayon."

And he colors.

He started out angry and refusing and ended up participating in something that had been hard for him. No yelling, no threats, no shame.

This is one possible outcome, not a script. Some children can't answer questions like these reliably, and for some, repeated questions will feel like pressure. If distress keeps building, or the activity no longer makes sense for this child today, adjusting or setting aside the expectation is often the better teaching decision. What counts as reasonable will look different for every child.

End on a Positive Note

When a child participates, I want the experience to end well.

"Hey, you worked hard on that. Well done, dude!"

And maybe: "Do you want to put this in your box, or finish it later?"

I don't want any child walking away feeling like they lost a battle with an adult, and I don't think of finished work as something I won. I want the child to walk away feeling capable, knowing that hard things don't have to become terrible experiences and that the adults around them will help when they're struggling.

Sometimes the Teaching Needs to Change

Sometimes a child refuses because the way we're teaching simply isn't working.

I've seen children do very well with certain materials or arrangements and struggle when the same skill is presented differently. A child might have trouble with picture cards laid flat on a table but succeed when the same cards are held up vertically. A child who won't identify colors at a table might participate enthusiastically when the colors go on a whiteboard and become a game.

The learning target hasn't changed. Only the way we're teaching it has.



Small adjustments like these can make a big difference, which is why I encourage everyone on a child's team to share what works. If a child does better with materials held up, needs extra time to process instructions, or lights up with a particular game, tell the other people who work with that child. Sometimes those observations reveal that what looked like refusal was really a mismatch in how we were teaching.

Safety Comes First

Sometimes refusal escalates into aggression, self-injury, running, or other dangerous behavior. When that happens, safety takes priority over everything else, including the activity.

Nobody needs to finish a coloring page while someone is at risk of getting hurt. In that moment, the right response may be to stop the activity, reduce demands, and create space. Beyond that, follow the child's approved behavior support plan or crisis plan, your training, your school's or provider's policies, and applicable law. If anyone is in immediate danger and the situation can't be managed safely, get emergency help.

Once everyone is safe, we can reflect. Was the task too hard? Was the child overwhelmed? Did we miss an earlier attempt to communicate? Did something we did make things worse? What could we teach or change so the next time goes better? For repeated or serious incidents, this is the time to involve the child's team and the professionals responsible for their support plan.

The Bigger Picture

When I work with children, I try to remember that the activity in front of us usually isn't the most important thing. Coloring isn't really the point. Neither is the worksheet.

What matters is helping the child build skills that will serve them for life. I want children to learn that frustration is something they can work through, that asking for help and asking for a break are worthwhile skills, and that adults can be trusted to listen. I also want them to feel the satisfaction of accomplishing something they once thought they couldn't do.

That's why I don't think every refusal needs to become a contest. We don't have to be harsh, and we don't have to make children feel bad for having preferences. We do need to teach, and good teaching often requires patience.

The next time a child refuses, try responding with calm confidence. Get curious about why. Acknowledge their feelings. Teach them how to say what they need. Ask whether the task or your approach needs to change. When the expectation is appropriate for that child, help them experience success.

Sometimes that means offering help. Sometimes it means making the activity easier, more enjoyable, or saving it for later. And sometimes it means sitting beside a child and saying:

"I can wait."



Continue learning

Open the companion resource and choose the next practical step.

<https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/when-a-child-refuses-how-to-respond-without-turning-it-into-a-power-struggle>

About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

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