

Passive Aggressive Behavior in Children & Adolescents: The five levels of hostile cooperation at home and at school

Do you live or work with a young person who makes you feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster? Passive aggressive children and adolescents have a knack for behaving in socially appropriate yet subtly exasperating ways that can make even the most patient, level-headed adult explode in anger. Sadly, this all-too-common response is ultimately reinforcing for the passive aggressive young person, whose inner belief that anger is dangerous is confirmed every time they see an adult lose emotional control. In this article, we'll look at the origins of passive aggressive behavior and the five distinct—and increasingly pathological levels—at which it is typically carried out by children and adolescents.

Passive aggression is defined as a deliberate and masked way of expressing feelings of anger (Long, Long & Whitson, 2009). The goal of the passive aggressive person is to covertly get back another person and, in doing so, cause that person to blatantly act out the anger that the passive aggressive person is so studiously hiding. Sound confusing? Isn't there a shorter path between Point A and Point B? Why does the passive aggressive person go to such convoluted lengths to express such an ordinary emotion?

The reason for the long and winding road is clear: to the passive aggressive person, the feeling of anger is anything but ordinary. Children and adolescents who grow up households where the direct expression of angry feelings predictably leads to punishment, shame, or violence quickly learn to associate anger with danger. A very common inner belief of passive aggressive persons is that their situation will deteriorate if others become aware of their angry feelings. Thus, they become adept at subverting their “dangerous” emotions through a series of behaviors that are simultaneously socially acceptable and infuriating. In the end, the passive aggressive person gains revenge while the object of their hidden ire loses control.

Passive aggressive behavior ranges from situational to chronic, annoying to pathological. Truly, it occurs on a continuum or, as my co-authors and I have outlined in *The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools, and Workplaces*, 2nd ed., across five distinctive levels.

Level 1: Temporary Compliance

At the first level, the passive aggressive person verbally complies with a request, but behaviorally delays acting on it. Temporary compliance is the most common form of passive aggressive behavior—utilized widely both by chronically passive aggressive individuals who feel uncomfortable with direct anger expression as well as by people who are perfectly comfortable with self-assertion, but make a situational choice to avoid a confrontation in the moment.

For a child who is called to the dinner table during his favorite TV show, temporary compliance might sound a lot like, "I'm cooooooming!" even though what she really means is, "I'll be there in ten minutes when my show is over." For a student who is assigned an unwanted project at school, it might be easier to say “OK” and follow it up a week later with, “I'm sorry—I completely forgot,” than to tell his teacher about his objections to the assignment in the first place.

Passive aggressive behavior at Level 1 is an everyday form of compliant defiance—so commonplace, in fact, in most homes and schools that it often goes by unnoticed at first. Yet each act of procrastination and “forgetting,” is cumulative and eventually—often abruptly--the targeted adult becomes overwhelmed by the small, petty yet repetitive and relentless acts of rebellion.

Level 2: Intentional Inefficiency

At this level, the passive aggressive person complies with a request, but carries it out in an unacceptable manner. Intentional inefficiency looks like a teenager unloading the dishwasher by putting everything out on the counter then claiming, "I wasn't sure where these went!" At school, it looks like illegible or incomplete work.

Passive aggressive individuals at all ages are known for sticking to the letter of the law, but violating its spirit entirely. When their sub-standard work is called out by an authority figure, their typical response is to go on the defense, protesting that the person is "too picky" or "just wants everything done their way." Owning up to their angry feelings is not easy for the passive aggressive person to do. Rather, if pressed, they will go to great lengths to justify their intentional inefficiency.

Level 3: Letting a Problem Escalate

At Level 3, the passive aggressive person uses inaction to allow a foreseeable problem to escalate. He takes pleasure in the resulting anguish. Passive aggressive kids act at this level when they return a car with an empty gas tank, even when they know their parent will be late for work if they have to stop for gas in the morning.

At school, a student sits by wordlessly as she watches a classmate download a virus onto a school computer. Knowing that the virus will spread throughout the network and infect all of the school's expensive technology, the passive aggressive girl feels no compulsion to share the information. Rather, a part of her believes the computer teacher deserves this fate, on account of him embarrassing her in front of her classmates earlier in the week. In any case, she can honestly say she didn't do anything.

Level 4: Hidden but Conscious Revenge

At this level of passive aggressive behavior, a person makes a deliberate decision--and takes hidden action--to get back at someone. This increasingly pathological level of behavior could involve stealing field trip money from the purse of a teacher who he feels has mistreated him, sabotaging the PowerPoint presentation of a classmate who got a coveted role in the school play, or slashing the tires of a resented step-father's car. Whereas the previous level is marked by inaction, this one involves clear, intentional, harmful, but hidden acts of revenge.

article continues after advertisement

Level 5: Self-depreciation

In this final and most pathological level, a passive aggressive person goes to self-destructive lengths to seek vengeance. From the teenager who dyes his hair blue before a college interview to the girl who starves herself to get back at her demanding father, this level is the most pathological. When a young person is willing to go to extreme, self-depreciating lengths to create anger and frustration in someone else, adults must recognize the pathology of the pattern and connect the youth with professional intervention services that can meet their level of need.

More information on the five levels of passive aggressive behavior and skills to change this destructive pattern of communication are available online through the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute. Resources include live seminars, online trainings, and the textbook, *The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools and Workplaces*, 2nd ed.

Passive Aggressive Diaries

Understanding passive aggressive behavior in families, schools, and workplaces

Signe Whitson L.S.W.

Signe Whitson, L.S.W., is a licensed social worker and the co-author of *The Angry Smile: The Psychology of Passive Aggressive Behavior in Families, Schools, and Workplaces*.