

TWU Counseling Center

Why Do Children Misbehave

Children seek attention. If a child cannot receive positive attention, he or she will seek negative attention. Often children seek attention when it is difficult for parents to give it to them such as when a parent is engaged in another activity (e.g., cooking dinner, caring for another child, talking on the phone, or working). When children are behaving, the natural response of the parent is to go on doing what he or she is doing, not paying attention to the child. The child does not get as much attention when he or she is being good. When their child misbehaves, parents often stop what they are doing to issue a warning or explanation. This provides the child with attention for misbehaving. Despite the fact that this attention seems "negative," it has been repeatedly shown that this type of attention is likely to increase the frequency with which a child misbehaves. Even when the child stops misbehaving at the time of the command, he or she may be more likely to misbehave in the future.

According to Dr. Rudolph Dreikurs (author of *Children the Challenge*), there are four reasons why children misbehave. Children misbehave to get (a) attention, (b) power, (c) revenge, or (d) to make their parents feel inadequate. Many adults might wonder why a child selects misbehavior over good behavior. That, according to Dr. Dreikurs, is the wrong question. A more useful one is, "What does the child hope to gain from their misbehavior. Why did the child do that?"

One way to identify what the underlying motivation for your child's misbehavior is to consider how you are feeling when your child misbehaves. For example, when parents feel annoyed when their child disobeys the child may be seeking attention. When the parent feels angry the child may be seeking power. When parents feel hurt by the child's behavior then the child's objective may be revenge. If feeling frustration then the child may believe he or she is inadequate and misbehaves to confirm this feeling. Parents can respond with more effective discipline when they know why their child is misbehaving.

Seeking Attention

Children require attention. If you do not give them positive attention they will seek negative attention through misbehaving. An important goal of parenting is to supply the attention needed to develop a healthy self-esteem. Dr. Dreikurs believes that over 90 percent of misbehavior is for attention. Giving your child positive attention through praise and spending time with him or her, and denying a child attention from misconduct, will generally help to stop misbehavior. However, if a parent constantly has to cope with attention-getting behavior then ignoring it may not always be enough of a response. Being ignored may be the reason for the problem in the first place. It can be common or seem appropriate to scold, nag, or coax a misbehaving child, but this reinforces the child's behavior you are seeking to stop. When parents remember that their child's goal is to get attention (any attention), it is easy to see that scolding or nagging only encourages more misbehavior. In a child's mind, the attention from an angry parent is better than no attention at all. If parents only notice their child's mistakes the youngster will make mistakes for attention. Obviously, the best way to direct our children to "good" behavior is to "catch them being good." For the child seeking attention, use the two "I's" of discipline: *Ignore* the behavior when possible, giving the child positive attention during pleasant times, or *Isolate* the child by using "timeout" when the child's behavior is too extreme to be ignored.

Seeking Power

Some kids believe they only count when they are running the show (e.g., when they have power). Rather than joining the struggle, parents should take charge by acting instead of reasoning.

When a toddler balks about picking up his or her toys, having a long discussion about the importance of cleanliness serves to give him or her unreasonable power. During power struggles, parents need to take kind, but firm, action. Talking does little good and only feeds into the power struggle. One way of avoiding power struggles is to give your child choices. For example if you want your child to take a bath, give him or her some choices about when they can choose to take the bath. Or give him or her choices about taking a bath or a shower if age appropriate. If you want the child to eat breakfast, give him or her some choices about what they can eat “Do you want cold cereal, oatmeal, or French toast?” “Would you like to vacuum or dust the living room?” “Do you want to do your homework before your free time or after?” Giving your child limited choices lets your child feel like he or she has some control over his or her life and whichever choice the child makes, it is the “right” answer.

Seeking Revenge

Dealing with the mistaken goal of revenge takes patience. A child who hurts others feels they have been hurt and they have a desire to “get even.” When a child is allowed to hurt others he or she establishes a painful cycle of relating to people through hurting and being hurt. To break this pattern, parents should never retaliate. Instead, try to build a friendship with the child while improving self-esteem. When a child has a better opinion of himself/herself, he/she rarely misbehaves to seek revenge.

Feeling Inadequate

The feeling of inadequacy can be an escape for a discouraged child. It is easier to give up rather than try and fail. Inadequate children may brag, boast or fight, and may be unwilling to try new things. Self-esteem plays a role in whether a child will feel inadequate. For example, constant criticism from parents and peers can make these children feel worthless. Words are powerful and parents need to watch what they say to children. Imagine how it might feel to a child to hear a parent say, “You’re stupid,” “you can’t,” “you’ll never,” “if only you could be like your sibling.” If his or her own parent does not believe in him or her, then how can a child believe in himself or herself? A parent’s radar screen can often seem more programmed to notice what their child did not do right than what he or she did do right. Even if you recognize and comment on the positive things your child does, he or she may only hear your displeasure. You may have to make a more obvious point of praising your child so he or she can “hear” you love and believe in him or her. When children feel inadequate parents have a difficult task. They must restore child’s faith in himself or herself by encouraging and praising whatever successes they achieve. (No matter how small.) Arrange for your child to have successes and find opportunities to compliment them on their behavior. Children are human and will make mistakes; it is a part of learning. Give your child room to learn, grow, and be successful. Keep your expectations for your child age appropriate.

When parents understand why their children misbehave, they will be more inclined to choose a discipline tool that will reduce the misconduct. If a pot is boiling over, clamping on a lid is not the best solution. To solve that problem, reduce or eliminate the heat under the pot. In a similar way, if parents can find and eliminate the source of a child’s misbehavior--the heat under the pot--they will have more success in reducing any behavior problems.

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Sources: Down to Earth Discipline by Michael G. Conner, Psy.D. and multiple sources from KidsGrowth.com