



OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE

Guiding Young Children Series: Why Children Misbehave

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Many parents ask, "Why is my child acting this way?" Children misbehave for many reasons. The information given in this lesson will help you understand why your child misbehaves. Once you understand why a young child is misbehaving, it is easier to choose effective guidance techniques to handle the situation. For additional ideas on how to handle a child's misbehavior, see T-2327 Responses to Misbehavior.

Children need to feel that they belong to you, to the family, to the class at school, to a group of friends. They may misbehave to gain membership or to find out if they will still be accepted. Thus, it is important to let children know you love



Interesting play activities help children to release frustration.

them and that they are still part of the family, even when they behave badly.

Children misbehave to get attention. To a child, any kind of attention is better than no attention. Some children feel their parents do not like them or do not talk or spend time with them. Therefore, these children act up to gain attention. Children who feel this way may even try to get in trouble to be noticed by a parent. Give your child attention when he or she is behaving well. Don't make your child misbehave to get your attention.

Children misbehave when they feel inadequate or lack confidence. They may act out when afraid to try new things or fear failure at a new task. Help children understand that everyone makes mistakes.

Reasons for misbehavior	Guidance techniques
Wanting to belong	Unconditional acceptance
To get attention	Pay attention to good behavior
Lack of confidence	Praise and encouragement
Does not feel well	Sleep, exercise, nutrition, and medical care
Upset by changes	Reassurance
Disappointment	Coping skills
Discouraged	"Everyone makes mistakes"
Feeling unloved	Hugs, support, shared experiences
New situations	Talk about desired behavior and choices
Imitation	Desirable role models and discussion
Testing limits	Be firm about important things
Standing up for self	Listen carefully and discuss their ideas
Because it works	Teach children acceptable ways to get what they want

Children misbehave when they do not feel well. Children need 8-12 hours of sleep each night, healthful foods, fresh air, and exercise every day. Without these essentials, they may be hard to get along with, just as an adult might be. Most discipline problems occur around 8 a.m., noon, 6 p.m., and 8 p.m.- times when children are hungry and tired. A change in behavior is often a sign that a child is ill or has a physical discomfort. Be careful not to punish your child for having a physical ailment.

Children misbehave when they are upset. A change in the season, daylight savings time, or a new schedule are minor factors that can upset a child's routine. Major factors can include divorce or moving to a new home. The child does not know how to act in the new situation and needs reassurance and instruction to guide their behavior.

Children misbehave when they are disappointed. A canceled trip, a parent that does not show up for visitation, or a rained-out ball game can cause frustration and irritability in all of us. This is when children need adults who can accept their feelings to help them cope with their disappointment.

Children misbehave when they are discouraged. Adults are often too quick to tell a child when they do something wrong and forget to tell them what they are doing right. Children who believe that they are bad will act bad, and perhaps hurt others. A child who believes he or she is stupid will not do well in school. Children need praise and approval, even for small things like saying "thank you." This prevents them from having to misbehave to get attention. People often say discouraging things to children that they would never say to an adult. Try to show your child the same courtesy and encouragement that you give your adult friends.

Children misbehave when they feel unloved. The bond between parent and child makes the child want to please the parent by behaving well. Parental love motivates the parent to care for the child. A loving relationship is essential for positive discipline to guide the child's behavior. Your child's actions will improve if you show signs of love: hugs, kind words, and sharing experiences.

Children may misbehave when they do not know what to do in a new setting or circumstance. Children make mistakes when they are learning something new; for instance, falling often when learning to walk, or mispronouncing new words. Try to have patience as your child learns acceptable behavior. Some acts that parents refer to as wrong are simply mistakes. The child needs to see appropriate behavior. Try to anticipate new situations your child may encounter and talk about what they will be like. Discuss the problems

and choices of behavior a child needs to make when exposed to a new setting. Parents cannot always be with their child when situations arise. Thus, it is important to practice thinking ahead. For example, talk with your three-year-old about how to answer the phone.

Children misbehave when they imitate their parents. Children experiment with behavior they see on television, at school, and at child care by mimicking other adults and children. Unfortunately, we cannot control what our children see others doing, but we can control what we do by acting as good role models and admitting our mistakes. If a parent swears, the child may use bad language as well. If a parent hits a child, the child may hit a brother or sister. Parents can say, "I was wrong to yell." We need to make clear to children which behaviors we want them to choose for themselves. This is especially important when bad behavior is presented as cute, heroic, or funny in television and movies.

Children test their parent's discipline. They want to know that their parents truly mean what they say. Misbehavior can occur when a child checks to see which behaviors the parent likes and dislikes. Be firm about what is important to you and the behaviors you value, in order to meet the goals you have for your child.

Sometimes children misbehave when trying to stand up for themselves and their ideas. This is a sign of growing up. They may run away from an abusive parent or refuse to do something they think is wrong. In some cases, after seeing the child's point of view, the parent changes their own views or behaviors. In other cases, the parent may decide to insist on obedience.

Honest Praise and Encouragement.

Great!
Good for you.
You worked hard today!
I knew you could do it!
Nice going.
Now you have the hang of it.
Perfect!
Terrific job!
Thanks.
That is right.
That is the best you have ever done.
Way to go!

Be patient. Children have a lot to learn. You have 12-18 years to teach your child how to behave. Children misbehave when we expect too much or too little from them. Take the time to enjoy your children as they learn about right and wrong behavior. Your children need to know that you accept them just the way they are. Let them know you will always love them and will be there to teach them what is right. Emphasize that they can depend on your love and discipline.

Children sometimes misbehave because it is a way to get what they want. If misbehavior has worked in the past, it may continue, whether it is wanting another child's toy or the parent's attention. For this reason, when you stop rewarding a child's tantrum behaviors, the child's first response is to throw more tantrums. The child, sensibly enough, uses the strategy that has worked in the past. The implications of this: (1) make sure you are not unintentionally rewarding unwanted behavior; (2) don't be surprised if an unwanted behavior increases at first when it has stopped being rewarded; (3) teaching a child an alternative way to get what they want is key.

You can love and accept your child without loving and accepting misbehavior. Make it clear to your child that they do not have to earn your love by behaving well; you love them no matter what. Show your child acceptable behavior. Emphasize that because you love your child and because you are a responsible parent, you want your children to know how to behave correctly. Children feel love and acceptance when you listen to them talk about their thoughts, feelings, and safety.

Be generous and sincere with your approval and praise. Try to say at least five positive things to your child for each time you criticize. Praise should be about the course of action your child has taken, not about your child. For instance, "You did a good job of picking up the toys" is better than saying, "You are a good boy for picking up the toys."

Avoid put-downs and name-calling. Television comedy is full of this type of sarcasm among friends and family. In many families, children and teenagers copy this behavior. The whole family tries to think of clever put-downs to say quickly. Actually, these insulting remarks can make people feel worthless, incapable, and unhappy. In an

atmosphere of put-downs children will not attempt new things for fear of being teased. Put-downs and name-calling are inappropriate discipline methods. For instance, calling your child a "knothead" for doing something foolish only closes the door for communication. Our culture is so full of such words that it may be difficult to avoid; however, avoiding them will have positive results for your family. You will be glad you made the extra effort to stop put-downs and name-calling in your family.

If You Want to Learn More

Video: VT 753 Successful Parenting: Discipline Makes the Difference
VT 742 When Your Baby Cries.

References

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- Hamner, T. & Turner, P. (1990). *Parenting in Contemporary Society*, second edition. Englewood, Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
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Children feel love and acceptance when you listen to them talk about their thoughts, feelings, and safety.

See How Much You Have Learned

This Is What Happened:

Would You Say This?..... or.....

This?

Peter broke a glass when he was drying dishes.

Don't be so clumsy!

These accidents happen often. Let me show you a good way to hold the glass.

Jasmine, age 4, wet her pants and cried.

You are a bad girl.
You are too big to do that.

Did you forget to go to the bathroom?. You can go change now.

Mary spills garbage she is emptying.

Can't you ever do anything right?

That's a hard job. I can teach you a way to carry the can so it will not spill.

Jasper cries in frustration.

If you would listen to me that would not happen.

This is frustrating for you. Let's go slowly and see if we can make it work for you.

Will cries because he cannot get a wagon wheel to fit.

I told you it wouldn't work!

You can do it. Keep trying. Let me know if you need some help.

A Record of My Discipline Practice and Their Effects

Complete this exercise one week after studying "Why Children Misbehave." Check the blanks that apply to you.

1. The way I used discipline this week was:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compare one child with another
<input type="checkbox"/> Explain reasons calmly
<input type="checkbox"/> Ignore misbehavior
<input type="checkbox"/> Isolation
<input type="checkbox"/> Let my child make choices and experience consequences
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise
<input type="checkbox"/> Prevent misbehavior before it occurs
<input type="checkbox"/> Remove privileges | <input type="checkbox"/> Scold
<input type="checkbox"/> Shame my child
<input type="checkbox"/> Show disapproval
<input type="checkbox"/> Spank
<input type="checkbox"/> Threaten and not follow through
<input type="checkbox"/> Threaten and follow through
<input type="checkbox"/> Yell and scream |
|---|--|

2. During the past week I:

	More	Less	Same
Acted calmly	_____	_____	_____
Acted firmly with kindness	_____	_____	_____
Let my child learn from consequences	_____	_____	_____
Used kind words	_____	_____	_____
Used unkind words	_____	_____	_____

3. The atmosphere in our home has changed to one of:

	More	Less	Same
Confusion	_____	_____	_____
Cooperation	_____	_____	_____
Friendliness	_____	_____	_____
Fun	_____	_____	_____
Hostility	_____	_____	_____
Tension	_____	_____	_____
Understanding	_____	_____	_____

Adapted from *Practical Education for Parenting* by Kent G. Hamdorf, Extension Specialist, Human Relations Family Development, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1978.

Practice Exercises

Place a check every time you give your child one of the following:

	First Week	Second Week	Third Week
A hug	_____	_____	_____
A kiss	_____	_____	_____
A pat on the shoulder	_____	_____	_____
A smile	_____	_____	_____
I love you	_____	_____	_____
Play together	_____	_____	_____
Your undivided attention	_____	_____	_____
Please and thanks	_____	_____	_____

1. List other things you did which showed your child your love; for instance, cooking something special or reading a favorite story together.

2. Review your child's health routines. Does your child:

	Yes	No
Get enough sleep?	_____	_____
Rest during the day?	_____	_____
Laugh?	_____	_____
Have annual check-ups?	_____	_____
Play actively outside every day?	_____	_____
Eat healthy foods six times a day?	_____	_____

3. Try one week without criticizing your child and making all corrections in a positive way with a calm tone of voice.

Why Children Misbehave

1. There is usually a reason for a child's misbehavior and we can discipline better if we know what is causing the problem. Sometimes you may feel that your child is misbehaving just to be mean to you. This is rarely the case. If your baby cries during your favorite TV show, it is probably because they are hungry or sleepy. If your children misbehave when your friends are around, it is probably because they want your attention.
2. Children misbehave for physical reasons such as fatigue, lack of vigorous physical activity, or hunger. Try adjusting their schedule to develop life-long healthy habits.
3. Children may misbehave when they lack information about what is expected of them in new situations. If we expect children to behave like adults, we are doomed for disappointment. Love them as they are- noisy, dirty, clumsy, silly, scared. Realize they are children for a very short time.
4. If your child's misbehavior results from a lack of confidence, try using more encouraging words. Rather than put-downs, use words that build your child's feeling of worth.
5. Children sometimes misbehave because it worked for them in the past. When parents stop rewarding behaviors like temper tantrums, expect the child to throw more tantrums. Firmly and consistently offer alternative ways for the child to get what they want.
6. Separate your child's behavior from your child as a person. Be sure your child feels loved even when the behavior is not acceptable.
7. Children need extra attention when they are upset by changes.
8. Children react to encouragement, approval, and kind words, just as adults do. They will continue choosing behaviors that get positive attention and kind words.
9. Children who feel loved will want to act the way their parents expect them to behave.

Helping Children Behave Better

Select responses that will help children behave better and at the same time feel they are able and worthwhile.

Which ideas are true and which are false?

- | | True | False |
|--|-------|-------|
| 1. It is not necessary to tell children we love them because they already know this. | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Children will be more likely to repeat behavior that has been rewarded with kind words. | _____ | _____ |
| 3. A child who feels well is easier to get along with than one who does not feel well. | _____ | _____ |
| 4. It takes children a long time—many years—to learn correct behavior. | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Parents do not love children who misbehave. | _____ | _____ |

Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False.

Children misbehave because they are young and learning.

Children need love when they least deserve it.

For more information, visit our Web site at www.okstate.edu/ag/parenting/

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