
Why Do Children Misbehave?

Dr. Elaine Collins, MFT, LPCC

DrElaineCollins.com

Do you find it hard to understand what is going on with your child when they seem to at every turn find a way to try your patience? Do you feel you are battling daily to get your children to cooperate?

You are not alone! There are several ways to explain children's behavior. There are several factors that make your children unique: heredity, personality type, age, and environment.

Of the factors, the one that is important on influencing a child's behavior, is their environment. It is both you and your partner's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior towards the children and yourselves, that affect their life style and well-being.

As parent's, you may have different styles of parenting based on the same factors listed earlier. You may tend to be permissive, democratic or autocratic, or be inconsistent, and fluctuate between these attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

Be aware of your own attitude and beliefs. If you grew up believing that you must be the best at whatever you do, you may push your children to over achieve and win at all costs. This attitude also serves a purpose for you as an adult, giving you desired status in the community. However, you may not always get the results you want, because it is the child, not you, who decides how they will respond to the demands and belief. Children that find that they can't achieve the demands and parent's goals constructively, will become discouraged and misbehave. They will rebel against the demand and try to find a secure place for themselves in life. If you find yourself having a driving desire that your child does not respond to, working with a therapist can help you sort it out.

Four Goals of Misbehavior

Rudolf Dreikurs, a renowned child psychiatrist and educator, born at the turn of the century in Vienna Austria, dedicated his life to children's development. Dreikurs believed that people are primarily motivated by their need to belong, and that behavior is directed at finding their place in the social world. Misbehaving are signs that the child is discouraged. They feel that they do not belong and are not useful, so they seek out ways to belong by misbehaving.

Dreikurs classified children's misbehavior into four goals. He used the term goals because the misbehavior by the child achieved something for them. Following are the four goals:

Gaining Attention

Children will attempt to gain attention in positive, useful ways, but if they feel they are not getting it the way they want, they will seek attention in other ways. Children will seek any attention, positive or negative, over being ignored.

It is up to you to change your responses to help your children change theirs. By your observation and awareness, you can show them that they can achieve significance through useful contributions, rather than through useless attempts for negative attention. The key is to focus on their constructive behavior and ignore the misbehavior. You can help your child feel loved for the positive things they do by noticing appropriate behavior when it happens. Distract your child from the attention seeking behavior with giving them positive alternative choices. In the next section, I will give some specific positive ways to influence the four goals of misbehavior.

Power

Power seeking children feel they are significant only when they are in charge. When a child is defiant, it's hard not to feel provoked and respond with anger. When dealing with power seeking children, you must refrain from getting angry. Don't fall into their trap! The minute you engage in a battle for power, you have lost.

A child who learns to gain power with their bad behavior, will continue to raise the stakes and escalate the bad behavior until you give up in frustration. Battling your child for power only impresses upon them the value of power and increases their desire for it.

Revenge

In the struggle for power, if the child comes to feel that they can't defeat their parent's, they will turn to revenge. Children who pursue revenge are convinced that they are not worth loving. They believe they are significant only when they are able to hurt others the way they have been hurt. Their behavior is showing you that they feel so bad about who they are, and so misunderstood, that they want others to feel what they are feeling.

It is important as a parent of a revengeful child to realize the child feels deeply hurt and is lashing out as a way to retaliate. The child's revengeful behavior stems from discouragement and is not necessarily always caused by their parent's. It is time to respond with affection and caring, counterattacking will only intensify the misbehavior.

To help a revengeful child you must disengage from the power struggle. As difficult as it may be, you must attempt to improve your relationship with your child by remaining calm and showing you care. Showing respect when they least deserve it will get their attention!

Display of Inadequacy

If the war continues between parent and child, the child will come to feel totally defeated. They will move from revenge by giving up and seeking to be excused for their behavior by displaying inadequacy.

Children who display inadequacy are extremely discouraged and given up hope of succeeding. The goal now is to keep others from expecting anything of them either. The misbehavior takes the form of not doing rather than doing.

To help a child who feels inadequate, you must eliminate all forms of criticism and focus instead on the child's assets and strengths. Help your child find small successes by acknowledging any effort to improve. Encouraging your child to believe that failure is acceptable and starting over is obtainable. Showing interest and confidence in them can help turn a bad situation around.

Check out Resources tab for more information, free downloads and books.