Why Young Children Behave and Misbehave

When considering discipline, it is important to look at why your children are misbehaving. Understanding why they are acting as they are will help you in dealing with them and in changing their behavior. Of course, sometimes children seem to have no reason for their misbehavior, but most of the time you can discover the cause.

BASIC NEEDS. One of the major causes of misbehavior in young children has to do with the fact that they feel bad because basic needs are not being met. Children will naturally become naughty when they are hungry, sleepy, overtired, or constipated, and sometimes when they are ill. A little planning ahead, however, can prevent this type of behavior. It is important to try to keep children on a flexible but fairly regular schedule, allowing for their own individual differences and needs for sleep, food, and rest. Remember children need to eat more often than adults. Allow for frequent feeding, healthy snacks, and enough water to drink. Be sure to carefully limit the amount of caffeinated drinks consumed. Sometimes we get into situations that are beyond our control, and the child’s basic needs are not met. We must always remember that it is not the child’s fault; he or she is only reacting to the situation in an age-appropriate way.

WEATHER. Bad weather such as rain, cold, and snow can be upsetting to children, keeping them indoors for long periods of time. Heat can also make children uncomfortable, draining their energy and making them cranky. Do your best to take your children outside even in inclement weather. Children benefit from the fresh air and outdoor exercise opportunities. Of course, sometimes the weather is just too severe to even try to play outside.

CHANGES IN ROUTINE. Changes in routine caused by trips or visitors in your home can cause misbehavior. The child might not be getting the attention he normally gets. His sleep schedule might be off. He might have pent-up energy due to being in a car or plane for a long period of time. Being around a lot of strange new faces can be disconcerting for a young child. All of these things can add up to opportunities for misbehavior. The cure is patience and understanding as well as loving support. Try to foresee some of these potential problems as much as you can. Your schedule will be different, but try to make sure that your child’s basic needs are met during these different and exciting times.
A NEW BABY BROTHER OR SISTER. The changes in routine caused by a new baby frequently upset young children. They may also feel jealous and notice the lack of attention. Prepare the child ahead of time before the birth of the new baby. Tune into her feelings, encourage her to talk, and reassure her about how special she is and how much you love her. Arranging one-to-one time with her, particularly after the birth of the new baby, can help a lot. In little ways that she is able to, allow the older child to help out with the care of her baby brother or sister. Doing so tells your older child that she is important and capable. It also gives her a sense of being included in the important affairs of the family.

BOREDOM. Young children can often play by themselves or with friends for fairly long periods of time. Sometimes, however, they lose sight of what they want to do and require a little redirection. Parents need to help their children keep busy with worthwhile activities during these times. Often a little wholehearted parent involvement in the child’s play will get her back on track and interested again. Particularly with very young children, avoid using television or videos to relieve boredom. Sometimes fighting and boredom go hand in hand when two or more children play together. A change in activity, separating the children, or getting them outside for physical activity can cure the boredom.

OVER-EXCITEMENT. Too much happening, too many people, too much noise, or too many toys can excite a child, and he may forget what he has learned about behaving. Special occasions such as birthdays or holidays may stimulate a child so much that it is hard for him to slow down. You may need to take your child aside for a few minutes during these situations and give him a little special one-on-one attention. This may be all it takes to get him back on track. Remember, when planning exciting activities, do not forget to attend to the child’s basic needs—food, rest, and love.

GROWTH AND INDEPENDENCE. The growing independence of children is positive in many ways, but their independence-seeking can get them in trouble with adults. Because they may not be aware of how dangerous certain activities might be, they may insist upon doing things that their parents consider naughty. They may also try doing things they are not capable of doing, which leads to parent-child disagreements. Structure your child’s environment so that she can successfully manage as many independent activities as possible.

CHALLENGING SITUATIONS. Certain situations can make young children cranky or irritable, and thus they may act up. If children are taken on long shopping trips, asked to sit still and be quiet for an extended period of time, or asked to participate in adult-type activities, they may respond with misbehavior. In the same way, children may also react with anger when not allowed to do some activities that they want to do. As much as possible, try to structure situations to fit your child’s developmental needs.
UNIQUE RELATIONSHIPS. Because children relate to different people in different ways, they also learn what works best with each person. Children may act differently with one parent than with the other, and they use still other behaviors with teachers, friends, and grandparents. If a child misbehaves especially with you, it is wise to look at two aspects of your relationship with the child. First, are you giving the child enough time and attention daily? Second, how are you reacting to his misbehavior? Do you find the acting up funny? Do you give attention only to negative behavior? Finally, after looking at your response to his misbehavior, see if there might be a better way to handle it next time.

LEARNING WHICH BEHAVIORS WORK BEST. Children learn to behave or misbehave by watching other people. A child will use the behavior that works best. If a certain type of behavior does not get a child what she wants, she is likely to try a different approach. Parents need to set good examples and show children what behaviors are appropriate, praising them for acceptable behavior. Always remember that you are a model for your child; she watches you carefully and learns a lot from what you do and say as well as from your overt and even very subtle moods. Truly, you are your child’s most important teacher.

RIVALRY AND JEALOUSY. Children often misbehave when they feel they are not loved. When children think they have to compete for your love and attention, they may feel angry and unlovable, thus acting in inappropriate ways. Every child is a unique, one-of-a-kind human being. Help your child appreciate his special abilities and gifts, and help him appreciate the special place he has in your heart.

In summary, children have reasons for their misbehavior. Our job, as parents, is to discover what is causing them to act in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. By helping children understand your rules, showing them acceptance and love, protecting them from over stimulation, providing them with a rich learning environment, and allowing appropriate independence-seeking, we can prevent much unnecessary misbehavior, making life more fun for both our young children and ourselves.

A revision of an article orginally written by Nancy Kristensen, former director of the Minnesota Early Childhood Family Education Program. Used with permission from Guidebook for Early Childhood Family Education Programs, St. Paul, Minnesota.