

discipline for young children

lesson 3

Why Children Misbehave



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VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Discipline for Young Children

Lesson 3: Why Children Misbehave

Children misbehave for many reasons. Once you understand why they misbehave, it is easier to know what to do about it. Ask yourself, “Why are they acting this way? What are they trying to gain by misbehaving?”

Children Misbehave When They Don't Feel Well

Children Need Good Health

Children need plenty of sleep and rest, healthy foods, exercise, and fresh air every day. When they don't get them, they don't feel well. When they don't feel well, they are hard to get along with, just as you and I are.

- A tired child is a cranky child.
- A hungry child is an irritable child.
- A sleepy child is a fussy child.
- A sick child is a cross child.
- An inactive child is a grouchy child.
- A healthy child is ready to learn the behavior you expect of him.



Note: Since it is awkward to refer to the child as “he/she,” all references in these lessons to the child as “he” refer to both boys and girls.



Children misbehave because they lack knowledge and experience

Children Need Time to Grow and Learn

A wise man once said, “Accept the childishness of children.” Children are not little adults. They make mistakes in behavior just as they make mistakes in learning to count or in making a cake. Mistakes and misbehavior are normal childhood experiences, a part of growing up.

Children lack the experience and knowledge which adults have. Mother may say, “You know better than that,” when Troy picks all her flowers. But two-year-old Troy does not know better than that. Many acts that parents call “bad” are simply mistakes and call for explanations. We need to be patient, to realize how much children have to learn.

Children Need To Feel Accepted

When a child knows that you accept him just as he is, it is possible for him to grow, change, and behave in an acceptable way. A child who feels accepted is likely to accept discipline, but a child who feels rejected is likely to misbehave and to resent his parents.

Remember! You can accept a child as a loved and valued person without necessarily accepting his behavior. For example, you can accept Terry as a loved child, but you do not accept his behavior when he wipes his muddy hands on the wall. Terry needs to know that he is accepted no matter what he does. It is his action that is disliked.

Children feel accepted when parents take time to listen to their thoughts and feelings. They feel accepted when they are not compared with another child in the family or neighborhood. Being accepted as a worthy human being and an important member of the family gives children feelings of belonging. They are more likely to behave well when they feel accepted.

Which one of the answers (A or B) will help children behave better and also help them feel that they are able, worthwhile persons?

This Is What Happened:	Would You Say This?	This?
John broke a glass when he was drying the dishes.	"Don't be so clumsy!"	"Wet glasses are slippery. Next time hold the glass this way."
Four-year-old Robin wet her pants and started to cry.	"You're a bad girl. You're too big to do that."	"Sometimes we forget to go to the bathroom. You can go change."

Children Misbehave When They Feel Upset

Children Need Security

Children are upset by change. When there is a new baby in the family, or a parent is sick, or the family moves to a new neighborhood, children may misbehave. They feel insecure when routines are upset and they need to be reassured at such times.

Children need attention and the security it brings. Give your child extra attention when he needs it—and you will find that there are fewer times when he seeks attention by misbehaving.

Children Misbehave When They Feel Discouraged

Children Need Encouragement, Approval, and Kind Words

Sometimes parents forget to let children know that they approve of what the children are doing. When a child gets approval for what he does, it makes him feel good and he will be likely to do it again to get another "good feeling."

A child who does not get approval and encouragement may think the only way to get attention is to misbehave. He may misbehave because he feels discouraged.

To prevent misbehavior, be generous with your encouragement. Thank Ryan for taking out the garbage, comment on the fact that he hung his coat up, and tell him you appreciate the good job he did of putting away his toys.

Caution: Praise

Approval and praise must be honest. Children know when they have not done a good job. Also, praise and disapproval should be specific and target the task, not the child.

For example, say "You did a good job of picking up your toys," instead of "You're a good boy," or "My goodness! You buttoned your sweater all by yourself," instead of, "Goodness sake! You're such a smart girl!"

When what the child does, such as picking up toys or buttoning sweaters, is praised, the child feels like a capable person. He gains self-esteem.

Here are some ways to show approval:

- "Thank you for helping me wash the dishes."
- "Great! You remembered to hang up your coat."
- "You really are doing better. Keep up the good work."
- "That really makes me feel good."

Kind words help children to behave well, but scolding makes them resentful and sullen. Try saying, "Toys belong in the toy box," instead of "Get those things picked up right now!"

Children react to kind words and scolding words in the same way as adults. How would you feel if your husband said, "Get those dishes washed right now!" Wouldn't you rather hear, "Let's clean up together and then go for a walk"?



Situation	Belittling	Helpful
Peter spills the garbage he's emptying.	"Can't you ever do anything right?"	"That's a hard job. I carry it this way so it won't spill."
Johnny cries in frustration.	"If you had listened to me, that wouldn't have happened."	"When I get frustrated I start over and go slowly."
Tommy cries because he can't get a wagon wheel on his bike.	"I told you it wouldn't work."	"Let's see if you can figure it out."

Sometimes it helps to listen to other parents talk to their children. Do they sound as if they love their child? Ask yourself, "Would a stranger know that I love my child by the things I say and the words I use?" Children react to approval, encouragement, and kind words the way a flower reacts to the sun. They turn toward the source of warmth and they blossom.

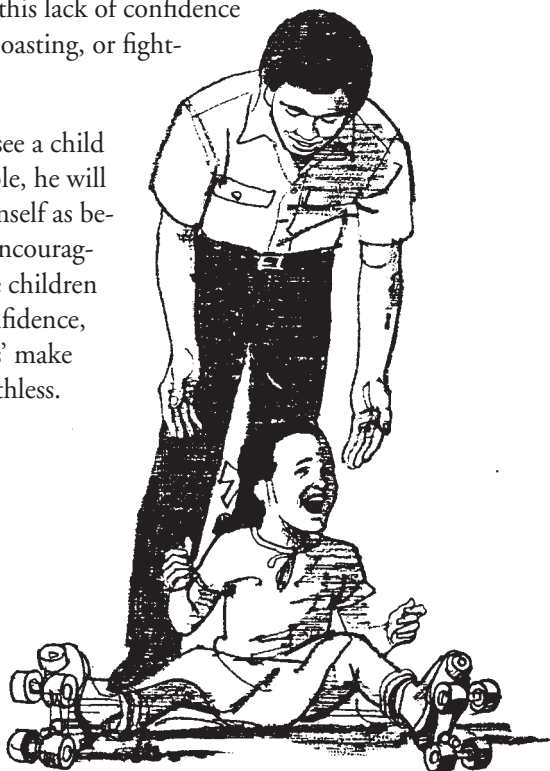
Children Misbehave When They Lack Confidence

Children Need Feelings of Confidence

A child needs to think that he is able to do things, that he's a capable person. A child who is confident of his abilities is willing to try new things. He will approach school and other situations with confidence.

Some misbehavior is caused by feelings of inadequacy. A child who thinks, "I can't do anything," may cover up this lack of confidence by bragging, boasting, or fighting.

If parents see a child as being capable, he will usually see himself as being capable. Encouraging words give children feelings of confidence, but 'putdowns' make them feel worthless.



Children Misbehave When They Feel Unloved

Effective discipline is based on a loving relationship. Children want to please the people they love. Without a loving relationship, they have no reason to want to learn to behave in an acceptable way—except to avoid punishment.

A child may misbehave if he feels unloved. It is not enough that a parent love the child; it is necessary that the child know he is loved. Parents need to give children signs of love they can understand, like "warm fuzzies."

"Warm fuzzies" are pats, hugs, smiles, and kind words—whatever makes a child feel good and shows that you love him. If a child feels loved, he is more likely to behave well and be a delight to have around. If a child doesn't feel loved, he thinks, "I'm no good; nobody loves me; I can't do anything right." And that is the way he behaves.

Children Need Love

You love your child, but does he know it?

Love is not love unless you show it.

WHY CHILDREN MISBEHAVE

To Discipline Effectively, Think About These Ideas:

1. There is usually a reason for children's misbehavior. We can deal with misbehavior better if we try to understand what is causing it.
2. If children misbehave for health reasons—fatigue, lack of vigorous physical activity, poor diet— try changing their routine so that they develop good health habits.
3. If we expect children to behave like adults, we are doomed to disappointment. Love them like they are, noisy, dirty hands and all. Realize that they are children for a very short time.
4. If your child's misbehavior results from a lack of confidence, examine how often you are using encouraging words rather than "put-downs."
5. Separate the behavior from the child. Let the child know that he is accepted even when his behavior is not acceptable
6. Children need extra security when they are upset by change.
7. Children react to encouragement, approval, and kind words just as adults do. They will keep up behavior which brings kind words.
8. Children who feel loved will want to act the way their parents expect them to act.



SEE HOW MUCH YOU HAVE LEARNED!

Place a check in the appropriate blank.

True

False

1. A “warm fuzzy” is a caterpillar warmed by the sun.

2. Children will be more likely to repeat behavior which has been rewarded with kind words.

3. A healthy child who feels well is easier to get along with than a child who doesn't feel well.

4. It takes children a long time—many years—to learn responsible behavior.

5. Parents don't love children when they misbehave.

5. F
4. T
3. T
2. T
1. F

ANSWERS

PRACTICE EXERCISES

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

	First Week		Second Week		Third Week	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
A hug						
A kiss						
A pat on the shoulder						
A smile						
The magic words, "I love you"						
Time to play with just him or her						
Your undivided attention						
"Please"						

2. List other things you did which showed your children that you love them, such as cooking something they liked or reading them a story.

3. Review your children's health routines.

YES NO

Are they getting enough sleep? (Or are they staying up too late watching TV?) _____

Do they need a rest time during the day?
(They may need a quiet time alone after lunch if they don't take a nap.) _____

Do they get an annual check-up from the doctor? _____

Do they get enough exercise? (Active play out-of-doors every day is a "must.") _____

Do they eat healthy foods? (Perhaps they dull their appetite with junk food between meals!) _____

4. Try to go one week without criticizing your child. Try to make all corrections in a positive way, using a calm tone of voice.

A RECORD OF MY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES AND THEIR EFFECTS*

Complete one week after studying Lesson 3.

Check the blanks that apply to you.

1. The way I usually discipline:

_____ Yell and scream

_____ Isolate

_____ Explain reasons calmly

_____ Spank

_____ Remove privileges

_____ Let the child experience the consequences

_____ Give choices

_____ Threaten, but don't follow through

_____ Show disapproval

_____ Distract

_____ Ignore misbehavior

_____ Scold

2. During the past week, I:

More

Less

About the same

Acted calmly

Acted firmly and kindly

Used kind words, not unkind words

Gave choices and let the child learn from the consequences

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

More

Less

About the same

Friendliness

Cooperation

Understanding

Confusion

Fun

Hostility

Tension

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