3. Why Children Misbehave

At a Glance...

Children misbehave for a variety of reasons. When parents can identify why their child is misbehaving, they can deal with the behavior effectively.

Time Required

30-45 minutes, depending on number of participants

Core Concept

Parents will learn to identify the reasons behind children’s misbehavior and respond appropriately.

Objective

Through class exercises, participants will be able to identify the reason or goal for their child’s misbehavior.

Materials

- “Goals of Misbehavior Case Studies” (handout D-4-a)
- “Goals of Misbehavior Case Studies” (handout D-4-b key)
- “Goals of Misbehavior Chart” (handout D-4-c)
- “Eighteen Reasons Why I Don’t Want to Be Here” (handout D-4-d)

Recommended Supplemental Handouts: SP 488-A Principles of Parenting: Enjoying Each Child as an Individual — available from your county UT Extension Office
Icebreaker

Give each participant a copy of the handout “Eighteen Reasons Why I Don’t Want to Be Here” and ask them to complete it. Ask participants who are willing to share the most unusual or the most humorous reason they listed for not wanting to be here. This should ease some of the tension as it acknowledges that participants may have reasons for not wanting to be here, but trying to list 18 reasons can lead to downright silly responses.

Facilitator Script

We just listed some reasons why we do not want to be in class today. Our topic for today is why children misbehave. Sometimes, the answer may be as simple as they just don’t want to be here. Let’s list some reasons why children misbehave.

Write responses on the board or flip chart. The list may include...

- They are tired
- They are hungry
- They are bored
- They are not feeling well
- They want attention
- They are frustrated

Discuss how to identify the reason behind the behavior.

Some of the reasons we listed can be taken care of with a little planning ahead. How might you prevent misbehavior that is a result of the child being tired, hungry, or bored?

List on the board or chart suggestions made by participants for preventing they type of misbehavior. If people have trouble coming up with ideas, offer some of the suggestions listed below.

- Take along snacks such as raisins, crackers, or dry cereal that children can eat until you get home for your meal.
- If possible, make sure children have had a nap before going somewhere where they will need to behave.
If your child will have to wait somewhere, such as in a doctor’s office, or the health department or be in the car for a long time, be sure to have some books, games or small toys they can play with to keep them from becoming bored.

Often children misbehave or are irritable when they are not feeling well. They may be cutting teeth, coming down with a cold, or have an upset stomach. If your child acts more irritable or restless than usual, check for a fever or other signs of illness.

Some misbehavior is more difficult to identify and deal with. Sometimes children are misbehaving for reasons other than the obvious things such as needing a nap or teething.

Experts have identified four major reasons why children misbehave. These are for attention, power, revenge, or giving up. Misbehavior that is done for these reasons is harder to identify, but children always have a reason for misbehaving, even though they may not know the reason. It is important for us to know why children misbehave, because we can choose the best way to help our children when we know why they are behaving in that way.

Let's look more closely at those reasons for misbehaving that are sometimes hard to spot.

**Attention:** The most common reason children misbehave is to get attention. When adults don’t give children needed attention, they will try to find ways to get it. Unfortunately, we don’t always see the positive things children do to get attention, like making good grades in school or doing their chores at home. Instead, we are most likely to notice them when they do something that we don’t like. Children would rather have negative attention than no attention at all. If we give children attention only when they act up, we teach them that misbehaving is the best way to get our attention, and they act up even more. If we give children attention only when they are doing things that please us, we teach them that behaving is the best way to get the attention they want. If you feel annoyed, irritated, or guilty by your child’s misbehavior, the child probably is seeking attention.

**Power:** Children may misbehave to show that they have power. Children want to do things for themselves and to think for themselves. If parents don’t let children have some power to make decisions when they are ready, children may misbehave by going against what their parents want them to do. If you feel like winning the fight or proving that you are the boss when your child misbehaves, the child is probably seeking power.
**Revenge:** Children sometimes misbehave to get revenge. If a child feels wronged or hurt by others, he or she may seek revenge. It may be simply by saying “I hate you” or “You’re an awful mother.” Sometimes children get revenge by hurting your or destroying something that belongs to you or to the person who hurt them. If you feel hurt, disappointed, or shocked by your child’s actions, the child may be seeking revenge.

**Giving up:** Sometimes children just give up when they think they can’t get the attention they need. They may not do what you ask, or they may do it so poorly that you won’t ask them to do it again. They may offer excuses like “I can’t” or “That’s too hard.” They may simply withdraw from you or the family so that you won’t ask them to do anything. If you feel helpless or like you don’t know what to do, your child’s motive of misbehaving may be giving up.

What are some effective ways to deal with misbehavior caused by the reasons we have discussed?

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**Attention-seeking:**
- Notice and comment on positive behavior.
- Ignore negative behavior if possible.
- Follow up on promises to help build a sense of trust.

**Need for power:**
- Give your child limited choices that are acceptable to you. (When it is cool outside, instead of asking “Do you want to wear your coat?” to which the child will say “No,” ask “Which will you wear, your blue jacket or your red sweater?”)
- Let the rule be the boss, not you. (Instead of saying “You have to be in bed at 8:30,” say “Bedtime is at 8:30” or instead of “I want you to pick up your dirty clothes,” say “Dirty clothes go in the basket.”
- If a power struggle begins, don’t fight and don’t give in. Be firm but calm.

**Desire for revenge:**
- Try to find out what has caused the child to be hurt.
- Use reflective listening. (Say “ Sounds like you don’t like me very much right now” in a calm voice.)
• Let your child know that you love and care about him or her.
• Tell your child how his actions made you feel.
• If the child did something to hurt someone else, encourage your child to talk with that person.
• Offer support, but don’t try to solve the problem for her.
• Offer to take her to the person, but don’t speak for her.

Giving up:
• Show faith in your child.
• Do not criticize your child.
• Encourage all positive actions.
• Don’t pity your child or try to do things for him.
• Teach your child how to do things, then stand back and let them try.

(Class Discussion: If class members are willing to share behavior problems in their children, let them tell the situation and see if their classmates can help figure out why the children are behaving in those ways. If members are unwilling to share, or if there is only one class participant, use “Goals of Misbehavior Case Studies” (handout D-4-a.) If the group is small, allow the whole group to answer each case. If the group is large, cut the handout apart and ask members of the group to pair up. Give each pair one or two case-studies to work on and have them share them with the whole group. Share the suggested answers, “Goals of Misbehavior Case Studies”(handout D-4-b key) with the class only if participants don’t come up with an appropriate answer.

Final Thoughts

Homework.
Give each participant a copy of “Goals of Misbehavior Chart” (handout D-4-c) to take home with them. Ask them to watch their children when they get home and write down problem behaviors they see. They should also write down their own feelings at the time of the misbehavior. Ask them to identify what they think the child’s goal is for each misbehavior. Have them bring the list class and share with other class members, if they are willing. Let class members try to figure out what the goal was of each misbehavior listed.