

Reasons Children Misbehave

Revised July 2009, by Rose Allen



It's important for parents to understand why young children misbehave. Parents can respond more effectively when they know what the problem is. Here are several identified reasons for misbehavior:

Sometimes children "act up" to get your attention. When this happens the best thing you can do is ignore the misbehavior. Put your energy in to paying attention to the good things your child does. When this isn't possible you can redirect the child into useful behavior, or you can impose a logical consequence for the child's actions.

Children learn by observing others. Sometimes when they imitate us, we say they are misbehaving. For example, if you swear, your child may also use bad language. When this happens, you need to change your behavior. Remember that children are more likely to imitate our actions than to do what we tell them.

Sometimes a child's misbehavior is really their way of testing you. Children often want to know if you really mean what you say. When this happens you need to be firm. A rule is a rule. When a child breaks the rule - you need to respond in a way that helps your child learn to follow the rule.

Misbehavior can also be a sign that a child is growing up, and growing up means striving to become independent from you. If this happens you can both take a cooling off period. During this time it's important that you remain friendly until things return to normal. If you can, give your child a choice of what they want to do, rather than simply impose one choice upon them.

When a child is feeling threatened or afraid, they may misbehave. Their misbehavior is a way of protecting themselves. When you think this is happening, ask the child how they are feeling. Reassure them if they are feeling fearful or in danger. You can then help them deal with these emotions. Never minimize their feelings or tell them their emotions don't matter.

Sometimes children misbehave because they are feeling bad about themselves. They feel bad therefore they act badly. Try to encourage your child. You can do this by arranging for small successes or finding opportunities to compliment them on their behavior.

Children also misbehave when they are tired, hungry or sick. To prevent this type of misbehavior schedule your errands when children are rested and fed. Try to keep a regular schedule so children eat meals at the same time, take naps if they need them, and go to bed at a regular time each night. If a child is sick, it's important that a parent or caregiver stay at home with them until they feel better.

Children may misbehave because they do not really understand what is expected of them or because they are unable to live up to the expectation. Be sure children clearly understand what is expected of them. Express your limits in terms of what they should do, and be sure the rules are age-appropriate.