



Why Kids Misbehave

Goals of Misbehavior

Rudolph Dreikurs proposed that children misbehave out of a mistaken assumption that they can gain social status with their own bad behavior.

Dreikurs described four goals of misbehavior:

1. To gain attention.
2. To gain power and control.
3. To gain revenge.
4. To display feelings of inadequacy.

Children often feel that they are not getting the recognition they deserve. This is normal and even productive--it stimulates their desire for communication and their awareness of self. Ordinarily, a child gets the attention they need with their good deeds. Sometimes, children mistakenly believe that they can get that same attention (the first goal of misbehavior) with bad behavior. Often, it works! When a child feels like they don't belong, or are "lower on the totem pole" than others, they misbehave as a way to gain social status.

When gaining attention doesn't work, they move to the next, more intense, goal: To gain power and control.

When gaining power over others to feel better about themselves doesn't work, they become angry and want to retaliate for what they perceive as the bad behavior of others (not recognizing them). This is the goal of revenge.

Finally, when all has failed to help the child feel more like they are important to their community (family, class in school, church or temple group, etc.), they feel defeated--that there is nothing they can do to feel important, and their behavior shows it.

What You Can Do

Gaining attention: If you feel annoyed, the child's goal is probably to gain attention. Ignore the attention-seeking behavior and help your child feel loved by noticing positive behavior when it happens, or distract your child from the attention-seeking behavior with alternative actions or choices: "Could you come over here and help me with this?"

Why Kids Misbehave (Continued)

Gaining power and control: If you feel beaten or intimidated, the child's goal is likely to gain power and control. Don't take the bait! The second you engage in a battle for power, you've lost. A child who learns how to gain power with bad behavior will continue until you give up in frustration.

Revenge: If you feel hurt, the child may be seeking revenge. A child who seeks revenge is really hoping to find love. Their vengeful behavior shows that they feel so misunderstood and hurt that they lash out, hoping to make others to feel what they feel. Respond with affection and caring. "I really care about you and I didn't raise you to be vengeful. That's why I have asked you to go to your room now until you can treat us better." Don't engage in the power struggle, remove the audience (siblings, friends, etc) and insist on a logical consequence.

Inadequacy and helplessness: If you feel incapable, the child may be trying to achieve inadequacy and helplessness. This is the child who has given up. Misbehavior takes the form of not doing rather than doing: not doing homework, not cooperating, not participating in the family, and so forth. Help this child to find small successes, believe that failure is acceptable, recognize achievement, and memorize the phrase "tell me more." Remember, showing interest will help almost any bad situation.

All of the above situations involve children who have become discouraged. Help them find encouragement in their day to day lives. Also, be mindful of the subtle ways in which you have become discouraged.

<i>Adult Feelings</i>	<i>Child's Behavior</i>	<i>Appropriate Response</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tired • Annoyed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirm the positive things your child does • Give attention to good behavior • Distract with alternative choices and activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotionally beaten • Intimidated • Angry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't engage in a power-struggle • Use phrases such as "I understand you want..., but that's not possible right now" • Stay calm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurt • Sad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenge-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond with affection and caring • Remove others from the situation and insist on a logical consequence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incapable • Helpless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequacy and helplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show the child you care for them and believe in them • Help the child find small successes • Recognize achievements • Ask them how they are feeling, and use the phrase "tell me more"

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