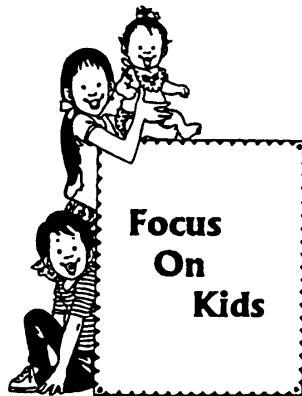


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Discipline: When Kids Misbehave

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Discipline is always a hot topic with parents. When families separate, parents are often concerned and puzzled by the changes in their child's behavior. How, when and "if" to discipline can become a bone of contention between parents. But how much of the misbehavior can be credited to the divorce or separation?

The bottom line is that **ALL** children misbehave—they are children after all and they are always testing and learning what is acceptable. If you understand why children misbehave, it can be easier to decide if your children's misbehavior is related to the changes in their lives or just part of a natural process of growing up.

Why Do Kids Misbehave?

Children misbehave for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is simple—they are hungry, tired, have been cooped up without exercise or they are ill. Other times, it is more complicated. Children can misbehave because they need:

- ◆ **Attention.** They feel important when getting the parent's total attention. More parental attention when children are being good can help this problem.
- ◆ **Revenge.** When children are sad or hurt, they may act out to get even. This can often happen in situations of divorce because children don't have the

emotional maturity to know how to deal with the hurt and pain.

- ◆ **A feeling of control.** When children feel that factors in their lives are out of control (such as divorce), they can act out.
- ◆ **More confidence.** If they feel they are inadequate in some way, they may misbehave to divert attention or to make you expect less of them.

It's important to remember that all children, not just those involved in parental problems, misbehave. In fact, some children do not change their behavior at all, for the better or worse.

A child's bad behavior after parents split can be tricky to decipher. Is your child biting his sister because he misses his mom or because that is what kids do before they learn how to control their anger? Did your daughter miss curfew because she just didn't want to leave the fun or was she mad because her dad didn't show up for visitation that week?

As a single parent, you have to consider carefully why your child is misbehaving and try to decode the emotions behind that misbehavior. On the other hand, to use the divorce or separation as a reason for all misbehavior is usually an overreaction. True misbehavior happens when a child **CHOOSSES** to behave inappropriately. Before you discipline, make sure your child knows the behavior is inappropriate.

Consistency is the Key to Discipline

The key to effective discipline is to be consistent. It's easy to understand why kids get confused when the rules are different in different homes.

Try these tips to establish consistent rules for your children:

- ◆ Discuss important discipline issues with your ex so the same rules will apply in both homes. If the two of you can't agree, you need to focus on discipline in terms of your own parenting goals. For example, even though it makes your kids happy to play outside all

weekend instead of helping with chores, permitting this only encourages them to think that love mean giving someone everything he wants.

- ◆ Have established rules, even if they aren't popular. Rules help kids feel more secure. Children need you to be their parent—not their friend. Parenting isn't a popularity contest, rather it's a responsibility to do what you believe is best for your children.

- ◆ Be determined not to let your children use the divorce as a crutch for bad behavior.

Don't let them manipulate you into changing your rules in your house because they can do something different at the other parent's house.

- ◆ Sometimes the demands of life can be overwhelming. While it is tempting to be lax about rules, don't! Parents often worry too much about making kids happy and not upsetting them. Give them their way and soon the kids are the one in control!



When is My Child Misbehaving?

Discipline is a positive approach to teaching kids self-control and confidence.

Before you discipline, ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Is my child truly doing something wrong?
- ◆ Is there a real problem or am I just tired or out of sorts?

- ◆ If there is a problem, think before you act. Is your child old enough to be able to behave in the manner that you want?

- ◆ If your expectations are realistic, then ask yourself if your child realized the he/she was doing something wrong.

- ◆ If your child didn't, then help him/her to understand why the behavior was wrong and how to behave next time.

- ◆ If he/she deliberately misbehaved, then ask your child the reasons for the behavior and then choose the manner in which to discipline. If old enough, give a choice between two paths of discipline that are acceptable to you.

Example: *Your child leaves his bike in the yard overnight.*

Choices: You can go without your bike for a week or you can do these extra chores for a week.



Questions and Answers

Q. My "ex" lets the kids do whatever they want at his house, then they complain and whine about my rules and want me to change them. How do I handle this?

A. While it is always ideal for both parents to agree on basic rules and guidelines, this often doesn't happen. The best way to approach the problem is to be positive and firm. Tell your children, "This is the way the rules are here. Your Dad and I have different opinions about certain things, but when you are here, these are my rules."

Web Resources

Positive Discipline and Child Guidance.....<http://muextension.missouri.edu/explore/hesguide/humanrel/gh6119.htm>

How to Discipline Workbook.....<http://outreach.missouri.edu/bsf/discipline/PositiveDiscWorkBook.pdf>