

Why Won't Kids Behave?

Recently, I was in a local store when I heard a young child screaming. I shuddered as I pushed my cart through the aisles of the store because the screaming got louder. I knew I was approaching the scene.

When I reached the toy section a three-year old was on the floor screaming. Mom was standing quietly next to him still looking at toys. I looked down the aisle, smiled and gave the mom a "thumbs up." I wanted her to know that she was doing well, ignoring yet monitoring her child. Some parents, out of embarrassment, would spank him. This usually makes the situation worse and can promote further hitting. Other parents might try reasoning with him but, reasoning with a screaming child in tantrum-mode is useless.

As I pushed my cart past the toy aisle, I thought about why kids get upset. I figured he was tired, or he was hungry or, since they were in the toy aisle, he could have just been overwhelmed by the feeling of wanting something that he couldn't have.

Most of us have witnessed a child who misbehaves. Sometimes, we can prevent misbehavior with some preventive steps. It's important to understand why young children misbehave because you can respond more effectively when you know what the problem is.

Here are seven typical 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. And, if you are parenting with a partner, both of you must know the rules and consequences and both of you must enforce them.

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 imposing 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.

Remember, the three-year-old screaming in the store, throwing a tantrum for not getting a toy? I saw him with his mom at the checkout and he was happily helping unload the cart. He wasn't screaming and he didn't get the toy he wanted.

That mom stood strong by not giving in to her son's display of emotion. It isn't always easy to enforce your words but, your children benefit from your consistent rules and consequences.

Need additional resources related to positive discipline? Go to <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/GH6119> for an MU Extension publication.