



## Finding the Causes of Misbehavior

When your car does not start in the morning, what do you do? Do you always jump the battery? Or do you always put gas in it? Jumping the battery will not work if you are out of gas. Putting gas in the tank will not work if the spark plugs are bad. When your car will not start, you need to find out what the problem is. Then you can fix it. It will not work to always do the same thing.

The same thing is true with your child. When your child breaks the rules, there is a reason. It helps to find out what the problem is. Then you can help the child do the right thing.

Your child may be misbehaving in two ways.

1) She may not be doing what you want her to do. For example, you may want her to put away her toys, but she doesn't do it.

2) She may be doing things that you do not want her to do. For example, she may hit other children when she gets angry.

There are some ways to figure out why your child is behaving or not behaving in a certain way.

- *Watch your child carefully.* Look for patterns in his behavior. Choose a behavior that is a problem. Watch for what happens before and after this behavior. This may help you find a pattern in your child's misbehavior. For example, maybe he starts throwing toys right after his father gets home in the evening. You could look at what else is going on at that time. Maybe he wants his dad's attention. Maybe he is hungry. Or maybe he wants his dad to play ball with him. One of those reasons might explain his behavior.

- *You can ask your child to tell you what happened.* You can ask how she is feeling. This may help you understand why she does things. It is usually not helpful to ask her why she did something, though. She probably will not be able to say why she did things. Many times your child might not know what she is feeling, either. But she often will be able to tell you what happened. That will tell you what is important to her.

- *Talk about the problem with other people who know your child.* Your provider might be a good partner. Your husband or wife might have a different view from yours. These other people can share their understanding of why your child is misbehaving. Together you may find new ideas and answers.

Doing these things should help you find out why your child misbehaves. Next, you can decide what to do. What you do should be related to why the child is misbehaving. It should help to fix the problem. Here are some of the reasons why children might misbehave. We also give suggestions for what you can do. Look at this list when you have a problem. See if one of the reasons seems to fit. You could try out more than one reason to see what fits best.

- *They do not know the rules or the rules are not clear.* Maybe you have lots of rules, or you use different rules at different times. Try to have only a few simple rules for young children. Try to keep them the same most of the time. Explain the rules to your child. Be ready to tell your child the rules many times. Children might be confused when changes happen in your family or in your setting. For example, you may have a new baby, or you may have moved to a new home. Children see that changes have happened. They don't know how much has changed. There may be new rules for the new setting, and they need to learn the new rules. Children make mistakes when they are learning something new. Try to be patient as your child learns the right things to do.

- *They are curious.* Children like to find out how things work. They wonder what will happen if they do something. This is how your child learns. However, your child may do something that you do not want her to do. She might do things that could hurt her. It is good to be curious, though. Make your home a safe place for her to explore. Put away things that you do not want her to touch or break. Give her chances to be curious and still be safe. Give her things she can take apart. Let her do “experiments” in a safe way.
- *They are trying to get attention.* Everybody likes to be noticed. Your child can get attention by doing good things or by doing bad things. He may feel that any attention is better than no attention. So, your child may break the rules because he thinks that you are ignoring him. Try to give your child attention when he is being good. Let him know that you like to be with him when he is doing the right things.
- *They want control.* All people like to feel that they have control over something. This can be a challenge for children. Most decisions are made by adults around them. But children might feel in control if they scream or yell. They might feel in control when they do things that make their parents mad. There are good ways to give children control, though. Give your child choices that you can accept. For example, let her choose whether she will wear her coat or her sweater. She can decide whether to share the toy with her brother or have time-out for five minutes. Choices like these can make her feel that something is under her control. This may also help you get out of a power struggle with her.
- *They are not feeling good about themselves.* Your child may believe that he is bad, so he does bad things. He may believe that the thing he does best is get in trouble. Help him learn what he does well. Help him learn that he might do bad things sometimes, but he is not a bad person. Tell him when you see him do something well. Tell him every day that you are proud of him. Say five good things to your child for every one bad thing you say.
- *They are tired or sick.* Have you ever punished your child and then found out that she had a fever? It is hard for all of us to do the right things when we do not feel well. Some studies have shown that most misbehavior occurs around 8 a.m., noon, 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. These are times when children are probably hungry or tired. Think about your child’s needs. Maybe a nap, a snack, or some medicine is what your child needs. Avoid taking the child shopping at naptime. Make sure your child is eating well and getting exercise.
- *They are doing something hard.* Children often misbehave when they are trying to do something they don’t understand or can’t do yet. They might get frustrated and yell or throw things. They may blame other people for the trouble. Talk to your child. Explain the task. Help him learn to do the task better. Or give him a task that better fits his age.
- *They think something else is important.* You may ask your child to do one thing, but she keeps doing something else. Children have their own ideas. This is a sign that they are growing up. Your child may feel that what she is doing is more important than what you want her to do. Respect your child’s needs and explain yours. Give her a warning five minutes before clean-up time or bedtime so she can get ready to stop her play. Try to see things from her point of view. You might change your own ideas or views. And maybe you can find a new answer that will work for both of you.
- *They are doing what children their age are supposed to do.* Children do things at certain ages that make problems for parents. Toddlers throw things on the floor. They dump things out of containers. Preschool children ask lots of questions and say “no” to parents. They do not sit still for very long. Those children do not need punishment. They need a chance to be their age. Parents should learn what is normal and give children rules and activities that fit their age. And it helps to be patient. Children will grow and do new things!
- *They have started some bad habits.* Children sometimes do not think about what they are doing. It is hard to change habits because they are automatic. For example, your child might suck his thumb or pull at his clothes. Older children might call their sisters and brothers idiots all the time without thinking. Try to interrupt the pattern. Give children something to do with their hands so they do not suck their thumbs or pull their clothes. Help them notice their behavior. Maybe you could give the child a point every time he calls someone an idiot. When he gets five points, he loses a quarter from his allowance. Think of a way to break the habit.
- *They don’t know what else to do.* Some children do the wrong thing because they do not know what else they could do. A child might want a toy that another child has. She hits the other child or grabs it away. Maybe she doesn’t know any other way to get the toy. You could teach her words she could use to ask for the toy. You could help both children learn how to share.

- *They are just like that.* Some children are very active. Others are shy or quiet. Parents sometimes try to make active children be calm and slow down. They may try to make shy children speak up and be outgoing. But there are some things that do not change. Children have some qualities that are just part of them. Parents should learn to understand and enjoy their children as they are. They can help their children manage their qualities. Children can be active and still follow the important rules. They can be shy and still be fun to be with.

- *They are imitating someone—maybe their parents.* Children learn many things by watching other people. They also see television and movies. They copy many of the things they see. Sometimes parents say, “Do as I say, not as I do.” That is very hard for young children. Your actions are very powerful. If you do not want your child to swear, do not swear in front of him. If you want your child to eat his vegetables, eat your vegetables. Help him learn which people he should copy and which he should not.

- *They are nervous, upset, or disappointed.* Children sometimes misbehave because they are uncomfortable. Maybe your child knows she is going to do something important. Or maybe she was looking forward to something and the plans changed. Many children cannot talk about their feelings very well. Those children might misbehave instead. Talk with your child. Ask how she is feeling. Reading books or drawing pictures might help. Accept her feelings and give her words to use to talk about her feelings.

- *They have a serious problem.* Some children have physical or emotional problems that are too big for the parents to fix. You might have tried many different things and nothing worked. Talk with your provider, your doctor, teachers, and other professionals. Maybe medicine or counseling would help.

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Think about how these ideas might work. There are other reasons you might find for your child misbehaving, too. Maybe you are having problems at bedtime. That is a problem for many parents. One child may be afraid of the dark. Another child might not be tired. Yet another child might have just had cola before going to bed. Each child would need a different kind of help to make bedtime smoother.

Be creative. Think about what might be going on. Talk to your child and to other adults. Try to understand the reason behind your child’s misbehavior. Then choose a solution and try it out. If it works, your guess about the cause was probably right. Maybe it will not work. Then you could try a different solution. You could also try to work with your child to find an answer. It is a puzzle, but it is not impossible. Remember, the same answer will not work for every problem.

Adapted from Myers-Walls, J. A. (2000). Finding the Cause of Misbehavior. From *Parenting Piece by Piece*, W. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Extension.

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*Positive discipline*  
(go to <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent/Guidance-Discipline/MakingDiscPositive.htm>)

*Child growth and development*  
(go to <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent/Child%20Growth-Development/Main-CGD.htm>)

**Other Sources:**

Wilson, E. *Guiding Young Children Series: Why Children Misbehave*. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://pearl.agcomm.okstate.edu/fci/family/t-2325.pdf>

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