**Family matters. “Why is my child acting this way?”**

Many parents ask, “Why is my child acting this way?” Children misbehave for many reasons. The information given in this lesson will help you understand why your child misbehaves. Once you understand why a young child is misbehaving, it is easier to choose effective guidance techniques to handle the situation. Children need to feel that they belong to you, to the family, to the class at school, to a group of friends. They may misbehave to gain membership or to find out if they will still be accepted. Thus, it is important to let children know you love them and that they are still part of the family, even when they behave badly. Children misbehave to get attention. To a child, any kind of attention is better than no attention.

Some children feel their parents do not like them or do not talk or spend time with them. Therefore, these children act up to gain attention. Children who feel this way may even try to get in trouble to be noticed by a parent. Give your child attention when he or she is behaving well. Don’t make your child misbehave to get your attention.

Children misbehave when they feel inadequate or lack confidence. They may act out when afraid to try new things or fear failure at a new task. Help children understand that everyone makes mistakes. Children misbehave when they do not feel well. Children need 8-12 hours of sleep each night, healthful foods, fresh air, and exercise every day. Without these essentials, they may be hard to get along with, just as an adult might be. Most discipline problems occur around 8 a.m., noon, p.m., and 8 p.m., times when children are hungry and tired. A change in behavior is often a sign that a child is ill or has a physical discomfort. Be careful not to punish your child for having a physical ailment.

Children misbehave when they are upset. A change in the season, daylight savings time, or a new schedule are minor factors that can upset a child’s routine. Major factors can include divorce or moving to a new home. The child does not know how to act in the new situation and needs reassurance and instruction to guide their behavior. Children misbehave when they are disappointed. A canceled trip, a parent that does not show up for visitation, or a rained-out ball game can cause frustration and irritability in all of us. This is when children need adults who can accept their feelings to help them cope with their disappointment.

Children misbehave when they are discouraged. Adults are often too quick to tell a child when they do something wrong and forget to tell them what they are doing right. Children who believe that they are bad will act bad, and perhaps hurt others. A child who believes he or she is stupid will not do well in school. Children need praise and approval, even for small things like saying “thank you.” This prevents them from having to misbehave to get attention. People often say discouraging things to children that they would never say to an adult. Try to show your child the same courtesy and encouragement that you give your adult friends.

Children misbehave when they feel unloved. The bond between parent and child makes the child want to please the parent by behaving well. Parental love motivates the parent to care for the child. A loving relationship is essential for positive discipline to guide the child’s behavior. Your child’s actions will improve if you show signs of love: hugs, kind words, and sharing experiences. Children may misbehave when they do not know what to do in a new setting or circumstance. Children make mistakes when they are learning something new; for instance, falling often when learning to walk, or mispronouncing new words. Try to have patience as your child learns acceptable behavior. Some acts that parents refer to as wrong are simply mistakes. The child needs to see appropriate behavior. Try to anticipate new situations your child may encounter and talk about what they will be like. Discuss the problems and choices of behavior a child needs to make when exposed to a new setting. Parents cannot always be with their child when situations arise. Thus, it is important to practice thinking ahead. For example, talk with your three-year-old about how to answer the phone.

Children misbehave when they imitate their parents. Children experiment with behavior they see on television, at school, and at child care by mimicking other adults and children. Unfortunately, we cannot control what our children see others doing, but we can control what we do by acting as good role models and admitting our mistakes. If a parent swears, the child may use bad language as well. If a parent hits a child, the child may hit a brother or sister. Parents can say, “I was wrong to yell.” We need to make clear to children which behaviors we want them to choose for themselves. This is especially important when bad behavior is presented as cute, heroic, or funny in television and movies. Children test their parent’s discipline. They want to know that their parents truly mean what they say. Misbehavior can occur when a child checks to see which behaviors the parent likes and dislikes. Be firm about what is important to you and the behaviors you value, in order to meet the goals you have for your child. Sometimes children misbehave when trying to stand up for themselves and their ideas. This is a sign of growing up. They may run away from an abusive parent or refuse to do something they think is wrong. In some cases, after seeing the child’s point of view, the parent changes their own views or behaviors. In other cases, the parent may decide to insist on obedience. Be patient. Children have a lot to learn. You have 12-18 years to teach your child how to behave. Children misbehave when we expect too much or too little from them. Take the time to enjoy your children as they learn about right and wrong behavior. Your children need to know that you accept them just the way they are. Let them know you will always love them and will be there to teach them what is right. Emphasize that they can depend on your love and discipline.

Children sometimes misbehave because it is a way to get what they want. If misbehavior has worked in the past, it may continue, whether it is wanting another child’s toy or the parent’s attention. Make it clear to your child that they do not have to earn your love by behaving well; you love them no matter what. Show your child acceptable behavior. Emphasize that because you love your child and because you are a responsible parent, you want your children to know how to behave correctly. Children feel love and acceptance when you listen to them talk about their thoughts, feelings, and safety. Be generous and sincere with your approval and praise. Try to say at least five positive things to your child for each time you criticize. Praise should be about the course of Children feel love and acceptance when you listen to them talk about their thoughts, feelings, and action. “You did a good job of picking up the toys” is better than saying, “You are a good boy for picking up the toys.”

Avoid put-downs and name-calling. Television comedy is full of this type of sarcasm among friends and family. In many families, children and teenagers copy this behavior. The whole family tries to think of clever put-downs to say quickly. Actually, these insulting remarks can make people feel worthless, incapable, and unhappy. In an atmosphere of put-downs children will not attempt new things for fear of being teased. Put-downs and name-calling are inappropriate discipline methods. For instance, calling your child a “knothead” for doing something foolish only closes the door for communication. Our culture is so full of such words that it may be difficult to avoid; however, avoiding them will have positive results for your family. You will be glad you made the extra effort to stop put-downs and name-calling in your family.