

Children and Difficult Behaviour

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Every child misbehaves from time to time. This is always distressing to us as parents because we would all like to be perfect parents of perfect children!

There are many reasons for a child's misbehaviour, and many ways for parents to help the child improve. Difficult behaviour includes:

- using bad language,
- behaving aggressively or violently,
- destroying property,
- lying,
- stealing,
- refusing to cooperate with necessary tasks, such as getting dressed in the morning, going to bed at night or doing school work.

Unintentional and intentional misbehaviour

Children can misbehave by accident or on purpose, and it is important to understand the difference, for example:

- **Accidental misbehaviour** - Your eight-year old throws a snowball in a friendly snowball fight and injures another child because a stone was accidentally packed into the snowball.
- **Intentional misbehaviour** - Your child steals candy from the corner store after you refused to give his/ her allowance two days early.

Why do children misbehave?

Sometimes, the causes of misbehaviour are easy to see; other times, they are hidden. The reasons may include:

- **impulsiveness and inexperience** - A lot of misbehaviour happens because the child does not know any better. For example, the eight-year old with the snowball was excited and having fun (impulsive) and may be too young to understand that even the simplest actions can be dangerous when done carelessly (inexperience).
- **resentment and anger at rules** - Nobody likes being told what to do, and that includes children. Yet, children get told what to do and how to do it all the time! So, it is not surprising that they misbehave out of resentment or anger. For example, your three-year old may hit a playmate after you insist that toys be shared, or your teenager may yell, swear and slam doors after being told repeatedly to clean up his/her room.
- **resentment and anger at unfair treatment** - Sometimes, we take out our own anger and frustrations on our children. We may yell at our children for being noisy when the real reason is we are angry about something that happened at work. We all do this kind of thing occasionally, but if we do it all the time, our children will respond with resentful and angry behaviour of their own.
- **frustration from too much pressure to perform** - Sometimes we push our children to achieve too much too soon. If a child is always being pressured to do things, like stand up on skates before he/she is physically ready or play games that are too difficult for his/her age, he/she may refuse to learn new things at home or slack off at school.
- **fears: real or imaginary** - If your child suddenly refuses to do things that he/she used to do, it

may be because of a real or imagined fear. For example, your child may suddenly refuse to get on the school bus because he/she has been frightened by a larger, hostile child who has started taking the same bus (real), or it may be a case of resisting going to bed because "there's a Tyrannosaurus Rex in the closet!" (imaginary).

What can you do to change difficult behaviour?

The most important things you can do are to be patient, avoid losing your temper and remember that love is more persuasive than punishment. Before you act, try to think a few things through - ask yourself questions. Then, act as calmly and as thoughtfully as you can.

- **Does my child know that he/she is loved?** Make sure your child knows that you love him/her, and it does not hurt to tell them over and over again. Love brings love in return, and it is a lot harder for anyone, child or adult, to behave in ways that will hurt someone he / she loves.
- **Is it necessary for my child to do this, or is it OK for him/her to choose?** Obviously, there are times when you can give your children no choice. Unsafe, destructive, dishonest or rude behaviour has to be corrected, and children must learn what the limits are. However, leave some reasonable choices to your children - what to wear, what to eat for breakfast (as long as it is healthy!) and how to schedule time for homework and play.
- **Did my child do this on purpose?** Becoming angry at a child for misbehaving because he/she did not know any better will do more harm than good. In the case of the eight-year old with the snowball, you can deal with the problem by using the incident to teach some basic lessons in safety. However, you should remember that you will have to keep repeating that kind of lesson many times before your child automatically thinks in terms of safety without prompting from you.
- **If I lose my temper, am I going to make matters worse?** Suppose your three-year old goes to your bedroom and breaks a string of pearls after being reprimanded. Obviously, he/ she is enraged, and if you respond with rage, you will be continuing a cycle of anger from which it may be difficult to escape. Try to let your child know that you understand his/ her anger and the reason for it, and try to get your child to put his/her angry feelings into words. Try to help your child think about making amends for the damage done.
- **Learn to use the "time out" method to help your child regain composure and self control.** Give your child some time alone, not as a punishment, but as an opportunity to recover from a bout of misbehaviour. Send your child to his/her room and encourage him/her to read, colour or play with a favourite toy until he / she is calmed down. Then try to discuss the behaviour problem constructively with your child.
- **Is the punishment I have given too harsh?** If you punished your child when you were angry, you may later think that you were too harsh. Trust your feelings. Remember that changing your mind is not necessarily a sign of weakness. Children have a very keen sense of fair play and will respect an adult who changes his/her mind in favour of greater fairness.
- **Try to put consistent routines in place for your children.** Children need the security provided by regular routines and events in a stable environment. Security and stability make it easier for children to behave in a stable and cooperative manner.
- **Allow for some breaks in routine to reduce boredom.** Once routines are established, they can be broken from time to time for special reasons. This gives children a chance to experience fun and variety, and still lets them return to the security of familiar routines afterwards.
- **Remember that every child needs to know there are limits.** Setting limits and quietly but firmly insisting on certain standards of behaviour provides your child with a sense of security and help make him/her feel safe and secure.

Do you need more information?

If you are concerned about your child's difficult behaviour and feel you need more help than family and

friends can provide, there are useful books as well as courses and workshops on parenting.

If your child's behaviour problems are persistent and serious, talk to your family doctor about therapists who work with children. You can also contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, for more information about local resources and support.