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Why Children Misbehave

Originally by Pat Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist
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Understanding why children misbehave is important. We can respond more effectively to them and their behavior when we figure out what is causing the problem.

Children misbehave when they don't feel well. Children need plenty of sleep, nutritious food, exercise and fresh air. When children don't get these things, they have difficulty managing their feelings and coping with daily life. A tired child can be cranky. A hungry child can be irritable. A sleepy child can be fussy. A sick child can be cross.

Children misbehave when they feel rejected. Children who feel unloved and unwanted may become resentful, moody and ill-behaved. When parents or other adults ignore children's thoughts and feelings, youngsters tend to think of themselves as unworthy. Children need and want to be accepted.

Children misbehave when they lack knowledge and experience. Children are not little adults. They are not born with information and wisdom. Mistakes and some misbehaviors are part of the learning process. Many acts that parents call "bad" are simply mistakes. These mistakes need to be talked over and explained. Children need firm but fair guidelines geared for their age and developmental level.

Children misbehave when they are upset and feel insecure. Children need attention and the security it provides. Change causes upsets. When mother is sick, when a new baby arrives or when the family moves to a new neighborhood, misbehavior is much more likely. Reassure children that they are loved and their home is a safe place.

Children misbehave when they are discouraged. Children feel discouraged if they don't hear praise for the good and positive things they accomplish. They may misbehave to get needed attention and closeness from their parents. Give children sincere praise, compliments and encouragement.

Children misbehave when they feel unloved. Children want to please those who love them. Without a loving relationship, children have no reason to behave in acceptable ways — except to avoid punishment. It is not enough that parents love their children. Love needs to be shown and demonstrated. Tell your children, "I love you!"

Children misbehave when they lack confidence. Feelings of inadequacy may cause children to brag, boast or fight, or they may be unwilling to try new things and withdraw. "Put

downs" make children feel worthless or scared of failure; encouraging words help children feel confident and build self-respect.

Ways to Prevent Misbehavior

Effective parents know and use strategies and techniques to prevent a child's misbehavior. Misbehavior may be prevented in the following ways:

- **Change the setting.** Put dangerous items, breakables and valuables out of the reach of infants and toddlers. For preschoolers, have play areas that are safe and worry-free.
- **Provide interesting toys.** Playthings prevent boredom and misbehavior. They need not be expensive but they must meet safety standards.
- **Make clear rules.** The fewer rules you make, the better. They should be reasonable. Consistent enforcement provides security and tells children rules are important.
- **Be flexible.** There may be special times when rules can be relaxed but not forgotten. Rules will need to change as the children grow in ability and responsibility.
- **Set a good example.** Children imitate those around them. They learn what they live.
- **Give choices.** When you can, give children a choice of several things to do.
- **Get their attention.** Say children's names, touch them appropriately and look them in the eye before you talk or give instructions.
- **Give warning time.** Tell children five to 10 minutes ahead of time that you want to change their activity. Let them get ready to go on to something new.
- **Spend time with your children.** Children need undivided, personal attention regularly with their parents and care providers.

- **Talk kindly to your children.** There will be occasions when you need to raise your voice or use a different tone, but this should be done rarely. Children will more readily listen to you, follow your rules and feel better about themselves when you talk with them in a kind, respectful manner.

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**Index: Family Life
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