



Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

How to handle the misbehaving child

By Dottie Bates, Parent Educator

It is happening again! Your child is misbehaving and you are feeling annoyed. Or maybe angry - or hurt - or helpless. What can you do? First, remember children really do want to please their parents – and there is often something they're wanting, some payoff for their misbehavior. Second, pause and give yourself a moment to take a deep breath to calm down.

Consider how you feel when your child misbehaves. These feelings are your best clue to why your child is misbehaving. Children misbehave for four basic reasons – to gain attention, to get power, to react to threats to their self-esteem, or to avoid responsibilities. They also misbehave when they are hungry, tired, or not feeling well. For example, it is just not reasonable to expect a child who is ill to be on their best behavior while you shop or visit others.

If your child keeps repeating actions that seem to draw your continued attention (the payoff) – you will probably feel more annoyed than angry. You may choose to ignore the behavior. For example, you may say, “My ears do not hear whining,” or you may refuse to go back into the bedroom after reading the bedtime story. Another possible response is to redirect the behavior. (You see your son throw his blocks across the room and respond, “Let’s put away the blocks, and sit down and draw,” or pick up the child and give him another activity). Of course, young children really do want your attention and sometimes have difficulty playing alone. Putting off some of your “must do” activities like telephone calls or household chores and sitting down on the floor with your child is healthy for both of you. You will be surprised by how much you can enjoy the simplest of activities by watching and helping your child learn.

If you are regularly angry with your child – it is a sure sign that you are in a power struggle. If the child does not get his or her way, he or she can at least make you angry. Power struggles result in win-lose situations, which set up a cycle of anger between you and your child. Children need to have some power to show that they have influence with you and the world. When you give children options, you allow them to feel powerful because they make the choice. For example, “You may do your homework when you get home from school or after dinner – you make the choice.” (The homework itself is never the choice.) Just be careful to only give choices with which you can live.

Respect: A child's self-esteem is essential to a healthy life. Self-esteem is how he or she views him or herself. When that esteem is attacked by name-calling, unfair punishments, or failure of respect, children react by trying to hurt back. (Revenge is the payoff.) A simple “I hate you” is a sure sign that your child feels that you have attacked who he or she is. It could be that you have not trusted his or her judgment or accused him or her of something he or she did not do. Labeling such as “you are lazy” or “stupid” is particularly harmful and can raise the level of a problem from a simple power struggle and angry words to revenge and hateful behaviors. Listening to the child about his or her complaints, stopping the labeling and name-calling, and getting outside help is necessary to help break this unhealthy cycle of misbehavior.

Withdrawal or time alone is necessary for children. However avoiding (the payoff) school, chores, or responsibilities

leaves a parent feeling helpless. Sometimes avoidance includes the use of drugs and alcohol. This may be the time to ask for help from professionals (teachers, counselors, or therapists) to address these serious issues. Delay in getting help when your child is into avoidance can be dangerous. Recognition of the need for help and prompt attention to getting help is very important. Your child is feeling discouraged and needs a great deal of encouragement. Special effort towards giving attention to anything positive that he or she does can help start the healing process.

We all make mistakes when disciplining our children. Keep in mind that the word discipline means to teach. As we “discipline” – we “teach”. We must decide what we want to teach – hitting, name-calling, fear of the parent, blaming on others – or respect, cooperation, and acceptance of responsibility.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. www.childbuilders.org ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral
call your child’s school counselor

DePelchin Children’s Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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