

Why Do Children Misbehave? What Do They Get Out of It?

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We repeat behavior that has a payoff of some kind. That is our nature. Why children misbehave is directly related to payoff.

What kind of payoff could becoming grounded, fighting with parents or siblings give a child? The answer may be hard to accept at first. The answer is connection/attachment/bonding: any of these words will do. If adults or children cannot attach in positive ways, a close second is to belong in negative ways. Feeling a part of the family, feeling connected to parents, is a huge and normal need in a child's life.

The opposite of love is not anger. The opposite of love is emptiness; a nothing feeling from one person to another person. When a connection is naturally to be expected and/or the child needs to feel attached at a certain time, the child will make bids for connection. If positive bids don't work, there will be negative bids for connection. Some of these bids are: Attention, Power, Revenge, or a Display of Inadequacy. If a child is naughty or a teen is disrespectful there is usually a reaction in the family system somewhere. A reaction is better than no connection at all. A small rather nice example is when little children (if they feel safe enough) in need of a connection will actually take a parents face in their hands and turn it toward them.

This, for the misbehaving child, is better than what he/she perceives as nothing or a lack of connection.

Misbehavior sometimes has a kind of hero aspect to it.

Consider this: A five year old is playing in the family room. The parents are arguing in the kitchen near the family room. Research says the child may look as though he/she is not paying attention, however, if that child's internal physiological stress levels are measured during such a scene, they would be high. The child is stressed by the arguing. Perhaps by accident, suddenly the child tips over a lamp in the family room with the bulb breaking and a loud noise. Instantly the parents come running to see what has happened. The child experiences that his/her behavior has stopped the fighting. The child surmises at some level that they are powerful and can even stop their parents from fighting.

This is very powerful to the child. It translates (mostly this is unrecognized by anyone) something like: When I am naughty, my parents divert themselves from fighting. I like that my parents are not fighting even if I am being yelled at, fussed over, or punished.

These are not the only reasons children misbehave of course. However, these reasons cover a great majority of behaviors that have puzzled parents for generations.

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