

Understanding Child Behavior and Misbehavior

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Tyrone's mother was overheard to say, "He's just like his father — has the same temper. He's just as stubborn."

Her neighbor commented, "That Becky of mine has the sweetest disposition, she's never any problem, always doing exactly what I ask. She's just like me."

These and similar conversations go on every day between mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends. There's nothing uncommon about what parents report about their children. In fact, it might be interesting to note that each parent in this case has really acted according to a pattern. For example, misbehavior of the child was attributed to someone other than the parent doing the talking. In this bulletin, we will be talking about fundamentals of child development as they apply to a child's behavior.

A child inherits certain personality characteristics from the parents. For instance, heredity establishes the developmental rate of the individual, and determines to a large degree a child's basic assets and liabilities. Environmental factors such as family atmosphere, parent-child relationships, the family constellation, sibling relationships, and the style of parenting also influence how a child develops into a human being. It is the environmental factor over which a parent can have the greatest influence in the development of a child.

It is also important to recognize what part the child plays in self development. A child has the capacity to: 1) decide how to use potentialities and environment, and 2) place meanings on events and act according to personal perceptions. It is mainly through these interactions with others that a child discovers which actions succeed and which actions fail to get the desired results.

Guidelines for Understanding Child Behavior

There are many ways to understand why children behave the way they do. For example, one way may be based on the presentation of general laws and principles about child development. Another way would have a parent focus on what an average four-year-old is like. While both of these ways are valuable for the parent, it is of greater practical value for a parent to understand the individuality of the child and to

become competent in redirecting misbehavior toward behavior more acceptable to the parent and society.

According to Dinkmeyer and McKay (1973) redirecting behavior can be accomplished to a large degree by understanding certain basic principles related to human behavior. It is their belief that a parent who understands these basic tenets will act more effectively in a variety of parent-child situations. Dinkmeyer and McKay emphasize that a child should be understood as a social, decision-making being, whose psychological pattern and style of life has purpose. In *Raising a Responsible Child*, they suggest the following principles for specific parent actions (1973):

1. Behavior is best understood in terms of its unity or pattern. A child responds as a total being with thoughts, feelings and actions. A parent often responds to a child as if the child were isolated, when in fact the child's action is really part of a set pattern. It is important that a parent become acquainted with the child's beliefs and assumptions about life, self-concept and about others. It is from these beliefs that a child forms a basis for behavior, interactions with others and willingness to accept responsibility.

No child merely reacts to a situation. A child first interprets a situation and then decides how to react. Many times a child will react instantaneously, but that is generally due to habit. A child's experiences in the family are very crucial in forming perceptions of how to interact with self, others and society as a whole. The same holds true for convictions, attitudes and values that reflect the child's lifestyle to others.

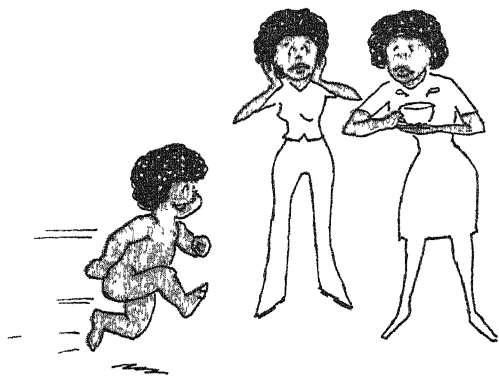
An illustration of this behavior is Susie's non-response to her mother's request for Susie to clean up her room and do the dishes. Her reluctance may show Susie's habitual response to order in her basic approach to life. She believes it is not necessary to cooperate and has learned that she can eventually wear down her mother to the point where Mom does the tasks.

Mom says, "It's just simpler if I do the work myself." True, it is easier for Mom to do it, but this doesn't help Susie to become a responsible person. All Susie has learned is that failure to respond to Mom's demand may mean a lecture, but in the end Susie gets her own way.

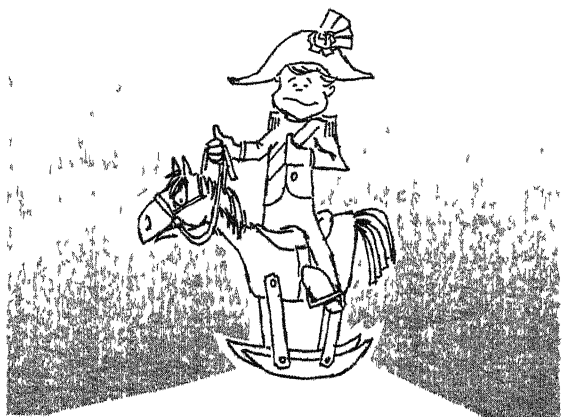
2. Behavior is goal-directed and purposive. According to psychologist Alfred Adler, every psychological action has a goal and it is this goal that becomes the final cause or final explanation of a child's action. The decision for the action of the child is revealed in the child's transactions with others. This decision reveals the child's purpose, and the consequences of the child's actions become the cause for the behavior.

An example: six-year-old Sally has an older sister and a younger brother. She is a bright child, according to her mother, but she lags behind in the morning, constantly needs to be reminded to get dressed, and she even needs help in dressing. If we look at the consequences and hence the purpose and explanation of Sally's behavior, we may get some idea of how behavior is goal-directed. By Sally's show of inadequacy, she receives special attention in getting dressed in the morning. She has her own private maid and if Mom doesn't cooperate, on come the tears in order to have Mom get her dressed.

Rudolf Dreikurs, a leading psychiatrist in the field of democratic approaches to parenting, has identified four goals or attention-getting mechanisms (AGM) of a child's misbehavior.



Attention Getting. A child concerned with getting attention usually prefers to get it positively, but, if all else fails, will accept negative attention rather than be ignored. As is true in either case, the behavior requires people to pay attention to the child. To modify this behavior, it is necessary for the parent to ignore negative attempts to involve the parent. At the same time, the parent must find ways to give the child positive attention and recognition.



Power-seeking. Control is the central focus of a child who wants to demonstrate power. The child is constantly showing

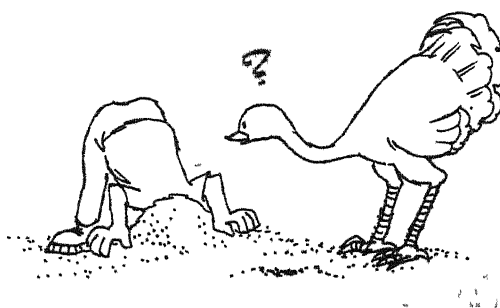
others resistance to doing their requests. A common mistake is for the parent to say, "You will, because . . ." This causes the child to become more stubborn and to demonstrate power. Defeat actually stimulates the child to find another way to show control.

Whenever the child's goal is power-seeking in the parent-child relationship, the parent must learn to avoid reacting to the child's behavior. Examples of power-seeking behavior can be disobedience, stubbornness, temper tantrums, bad habits (thumb-sucking, nose-picking, masturbation) and dawdling.



Revenge. The child who fails to gain attention through positive and/or negative attention or power will often want to get even with the parent for what the child believes the parent has done to the child. The child has numerous ways to punish the parent and get revenge. To be called by the parent "the worst" or "the most horrible" is often the child's goal.

In most cases the child enjoys mutual antagonism and will often enjoy being able to hurt. It is important for a parent to recognize that retaliation contributes to a child's negative self-concept. Revenge may take the form of stealing, violence and/or bed-wetting.



Inadequacy. The child who displays inadequacy or discouragement has developed an attention-getting mechanism that keeps others from expecting anything from the child. In most cases apparent total inadequacy or discouragement is only partial. However, it is very important for the parent to determine whether the child is refusing involvement in order to gain attention, to defy authority, to punish and hurt or just because there is nothing hoped for in the situation. In the latter case a child will hide behind a screen of inadequacy. A

parent who identifies inadequacy as the child's AGM needs to avoid all forms of criticism and should focus more on encouragement and the child's strengths, recognizing any effort, no matter how small.

A child's misbehavior may result from the pursuit of one or more of the previous mentioned four goals. To learn the reason for the child's misbehavior, the parent should consider these four points.

- A) If the parent is annoyed by the child's behavior, the child is probably seeking **attention**.
- B) If the parent feels challenged and wants to control the child, the child probably is displaying the desire for **power**.
- C) If the parent feels hurt or dismayed, the child's behavior will probably be a show of **revenge**.
- D) If the parent feels despair and doesn't know what to do, it is probably the child's intention to demonstrate misbehavior in the form of **inadequacy**. (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1973)

See chart — Goals of The Misbehaving Child Page 5 for additional Child Guidance techniques.

3. A child's self-image is revealed by the way the child seeks to be known. Each child has a unique place in the family, among siblings, among peers and in the community. The reputation that a child tries to develop comes from the child's personal perception of what will be recognized by family, peer group and society. For example, a little boy pretends he is football athlete Archie Griffin. Or the little girl is the cutest, most helpful little helper Mom has ever had.

Sometimes the child's reputation is developed by negative traits such as shyness, stubbornness and cruelty. Whatever trait the child chooses, the child will want it to be the best. This will give the child status and, therein, reason to behave in ways that encourage and fortify this image.

In order to understand, correct or even strengthen a positive behavior pattern, a parent must learn the basic motive that directs the child's life style. The child's misbehavior must be changed from passive and destructive modes of behavior. To accomplish this change in behavior, a parent will need to direct thoughts and responses toward the child's *assets*, reinforcing the child's *self-esteem* and *feeling of worth*, helping the child eventually to redirect behavior toward a more active and constructive behavior pattern.

4. The child's total behavior has social meaning. In most social transactions with peers or parents a child is aware of how the other person will act and react, so the child will act accordingly. Psychological position and perception of the meaning of behavior will influence the child's action. If, for example, the child is the oldest of three children and believes that the oldest must be ruler of the family, when the father is absent, the child will behave accordingly.

If the child perceives the possession of certain privileges attached to a particular role, this determines the course of the child's future interactions. A child will change only as others (parent, peer group) fail to respond to the child's actions or expect changes in the child's actions.

5. A child has the creative capacity to make a biased interpretation based on self-perception of the situation. A child is constantly interpreting, evaluating and making decisions about how to react to any given situation. For example, Timmy is told to pick up his toys before dinner. He doesn't. He hears Mother make the same request a second and even a

third time and still doesn't respond. Finally, Mother screams out, threatening Timmy. What has Timmy learned? He has learned that when Mother screams out and threatens, this is the call that counts. When he hears this last request, he determines by the urgency and the tone of her voice, "Mom means business."

From Timmy's point of view, picking up the toys and coming to dinner only makes sense when he perceives urgency and the possibility of some unpleasant action by his mother. Some people would say that Timmy is experiencing a childhood disease commonly diagnosed as "Mother Deafness." The prescription for Mother Deafness is for mother to learn to ask Timmy only once, letting him experience the logical consequences of failing to respond accordingly. This is more effective than yelling, screaming and threatening.

6. Each child has the basic need to actualize human potential. To allow a child to develop an inner peace, a parent should recognize that each child has the following psychological needs:

- To be loved and accepted
- To be secure and relatively free of threat and harm
- To belong, to be a part of a group
- To be approved of and recognized as an individual who functions in a unique way
- To move continually toward independence, responsibility and decision-making

A child whose needs are met will attain inner peace that in turn will more than likely result in positive behavior. If the child does not feel accepted, loved, secure, approved of and responsible, the result may be misbehavior. The above checklist is good for the parent considering reasons and purposes for misbehavior.

The Family and How It Influences the Child

Within the family setting, an infant observes and interprets what is seen, heard and felt. The infant sees, hears and senses in the immediate environment. It is at this time that the child's personality and character begin to form. The responses the child receives from people help the child to figure out how to react.

It is first within the family where the child begins to develop self concept, a concept of what the world is like, and how effective one can be in coping with family members and members outside of the family. The family in which a child lives, whether it be a natural family, an adoptive family, a foster family or even an institutional setting is the laboratory in which the child works out a unique way of interacting with self and others.

The child first learns how to observe, interact and evaluate by being part of the family. The family (or in some cases the institution) is important to the child. This is the first exposure of the child to a set of assumptions about life. The child observes the relationships both within and outside the family or institutional structure and interprets these as the way to interact with other people.

The family or institutional style of life is not the only determinant of a child's behavior, but one important part of the whole behavior pattern of the child. Each child is free to accept or reject the style of life in which one grows up.

The Family Constellation

The position in which a child lives within the family plays a very significant part in the growth of the child's personality. It is according to this ordinal position (actual numerical position—oldest, second, middle, youngest or only child) that certain behavior traits and attitudes develop. The most often used description of the ordinal position suggests:

The *first child* is for some period of time an only child, who eventually is dethroned. This child is concerned about remaining an "only child," and when this becomes impossible, the child may do any of several things. The child may give up, become a trouble maker or even become too good. The child will do anything in order to be the best or the worst (which is another way of being first).

As the *second child* grows older, this child may at first feel inferior to the older brother or sister. This child will show signs of competition and will attempt to surpass other siblings. If there is much competition between two children, the second child, in all probability, will try to become more of what the first sibling is not, and give up in areas where perceived success cannot be reached. For example, if the oldest child is good at academics, the second child may try to become good in athletics.

The *middle child* may for all practical purposes feel squeezed by the older and younger siblings. This child feels squeezed out of the rights and privileges that the other siblings seem to enjoy. A middle child may give up and feel that life is unfair, or will conquer this perception and succeed in overcoming both competitors.

The *youngest child*, sometimes called the "baby of the family," establishes a special place within the family constellation. Often the youngest child will take advantage of this position in getting what the child wants most out of life. This child may become the cutest, the most charming or even the most helpless of all the siblings.

If the child is an *only child*, the developmental years will be spent in the company of adults. The only child will probably develop characteristics that win the approval, attention and assistance of adults. Consequently, this child may feel adult and entitled to adult privileges way before becoming an adult.

Again, remember that birth order, like family style, should never be considered to be the only determinant of a child's behavior pattern, but one of many factors that may provide clues about a child's behavior. Each child has the capacity to choose an individual role in the sibling relationship, but it is up to the child to determine how that role is perceived and used within the family constellation.

Parental Guidance

A wise parent understands that the child seeks ways to improve status within the family, peer group and social community. At the same time, the parent recognizes that the child responds to the needs of others not because the child should, but because the child wishes to be a part of the group. The parent who allows the child sufficient freedom to develop without violating the rights of others is raising a child who will be a psychologically mature individual, capable of adjustment and able to contribute to society in a socially responsible manner.

Resources

1. Dinkmeyer, Don and McKay, Gary D. *Raising A Responsible Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.
2. Dreikurs, Rudolf. *Children — The Challenge*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1964.
3. Dreikurs, Rudolf. *Coping with Children's Misbehaviors*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc. 1972.

To Think About and To Talk About— For Discussion

1. What do you think the author believes about children's behavior? Does it apply to adults as well?
2. What are the four goals of a misbehaving child?
3. How can you tell if your child is seeking the goal of Attention? Power? Revenge? Inadequacy?
4. In general, how should a parent respond to each of the above Attention-Getting Mechanisms? (AGM)
5. Why is it important to consider changing our behavior rather than changing the child's behavior?
6. In order to actualize human potential, what are some very basic needs of each child?
7. How does the family influence the child?

Parent-Child Situation

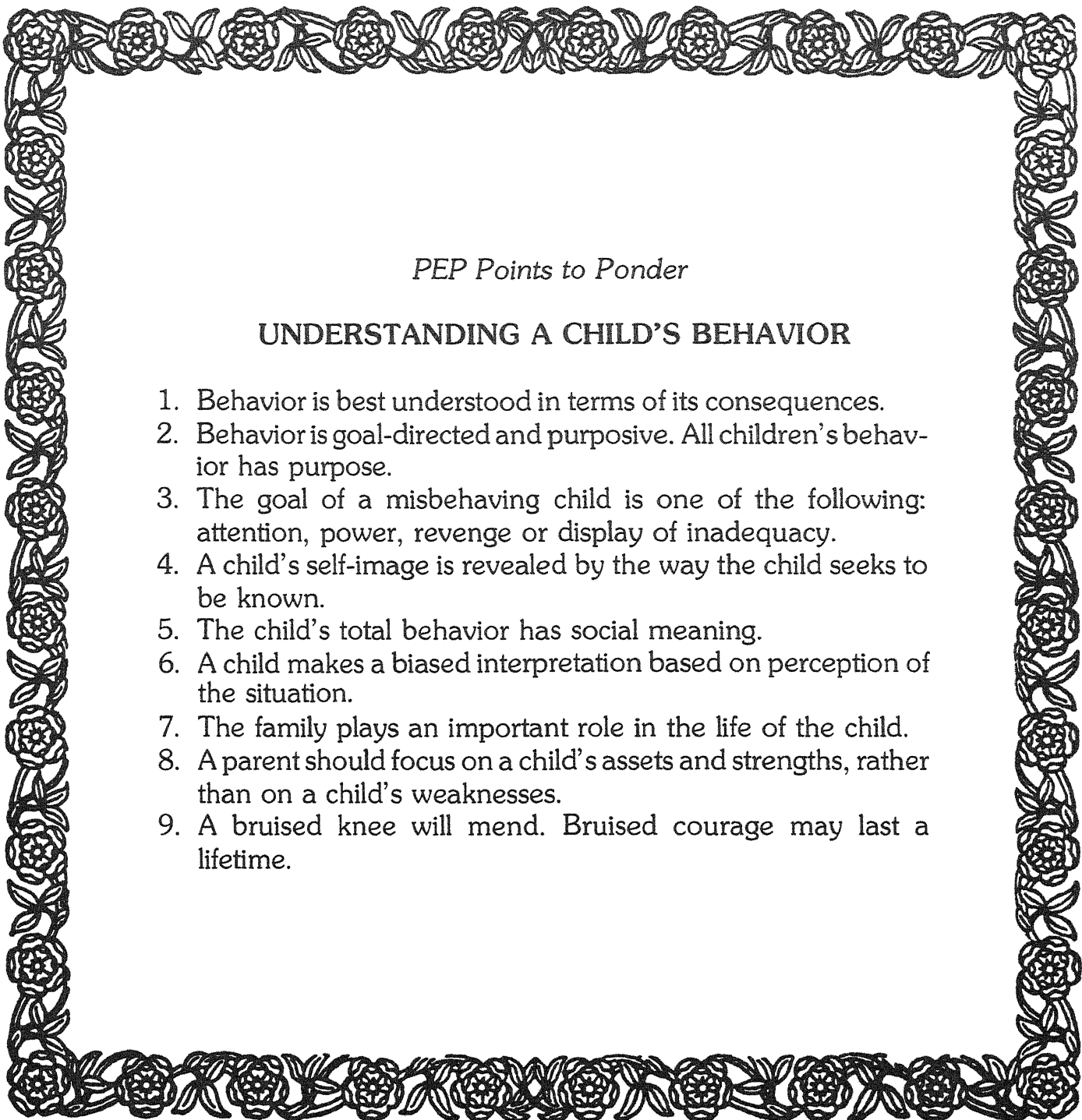
Seven-year-old Billy is very outgoing. When he and his mother go to the home of one of her friends who has a seven-year-old son, Billy begins to pick fights. Mother tries to talk with Billy about it, but he keeps saying, "It was his fault." Mother sighs and apologizes to her friend, "Billy is usually so friendly, he never has done this with Timmy or Jim who are five. I guess it must be a stage he's in."

1. What is the purpose of Billy's behavior?
2. How did you make your decision about Billy's purpose?
3. How can fighting be an expression of a desire for power?

At-Home Activity

Observe one child in your family and analyze the child's behavior according to the four goals of misbehavior described in this reading: Attention, Power, Revenge, and Inadequacy. To do this, analyze your child's misbehavior by using the following criteria:

1. What did the child do?
2. What was the purpose of the child's misbehavior?
3. How did you feel as a parent about the child's behavior?
4. What type of action did you take?
5. How did your child respond to the type of action you took?



PEP Points to Ponder

UNDERSTANDING A CHILD'S BEHAVIOR

1. Behavior is best understood in terms of its consequences.
2. Behavior is goal-directed and purposive. All children's behavior has purpose.
3. The goal of a misbehaving child is one of the following: attention, power, revenge or display of inadequacy.
4. A child's self-image is revealed by the way the child seeks to be known.
5. The child's total behavior has social meaning.
6. A child makes a biased interpretation based on perception of the situation.
7. The family plays an important role in the life of the child.
8. A parent should focus on a child's assets and strengths, rather than on a child's weaknesses.
9. A bruised knee will mend. Bruised courage may last a lifetime.

GOALS OF THE MISBEHAVING CHILD

The Goals of the Child's Behavior	Child's Self Talk	Parent's Feelings and Reaction	Probable Reaction in Child	Corrective Behavior Procedure by Parent
ATTENTION				
Child wants to keep parent involved	I only count when I am being noticed or am involved. What I want is to keep you busy with me. I can't be happy unless you give me attention.	<p>Feeling — annoyed, irritated</p> <p>Reactions — remind — coax</p> <p>Thinking This child occupies too much of my time. I wish this child would not bother me.</p>	Desired attention is given, child stops behavior for a short time, but later resumes unwanted behavior again or in another way.	Don't Give Attention When Child Demands it. If possible ignore the child's misbehavior but give attention when the child is not asking for it. Remember that rewarding, coaxing, reminding are giving undue attention.
POWER				
Child wants to be the boss child's desire for power.	I only count when I am in control of the situation, when you do what I want you to do. No one can boss me. I want to defeat you.	<p>Feeling — angry, threatened, provoked</p> <p>Reaction — to fight or give in</p> <p>Thinking This child can't do this to me . . . Who is running this show, you or me? You can't get away with that!</p>	Child's behavior continues to get worse. Child also is determined to win. Behavior either is active or passive aggressive. The child feels a sense of winning when the parent gets upset.	Remove self or withdraw from conflict. Act instead of reacting. Avoid responding to the expectations of the child, which is fighting, arguing, fussiness. Instead, be friendly and respect the child. Remember that fighting or giving in only increases the power struggle.
REVENGE				
Child wants and tries to get even. Feels I belong only by hurting others. I feel hurt.	I can't be accepted and liked by those around me. I lack power, I'll hurt others as I have been hurt by them. I'll hurt anyone or anything I can.	<p>Feeling — hurt, angry, outraged, disliked.</p> <p>Reaction retaliates</p> <p>Thinking I'll get even, by showing you how mean I can get. How can I get even?</p>	Child wants to get even for his parent's revenge. Begins to retaliate, makes parent feel sorry for his success. May choose another weapon to intensify the revenge.	Remove yourself from the situation without retaliation. Give positive attention. Do the unexpected, give encouragement, allow natural consequences to take a part. Show the child that you do care and love the child.
INADEQUACY				
Child wants to be alone and not depend on self.	I can't do anything right, so what's the use. I'm no good, leave me alone. Leave me out.	<p>Feeling — Helpless, despair, discouraged</p> <p>Reaction Confused, and many times will agree with the child that nothing can be done</p> <p>Thinking I give up, I can't do anything with this child.</p>	Retreats further if punished or pressured. Child appears passive and fails to respond to anything, is unwilling to try.	Encourage any positive behavior or attempts. Show faith in child's ability to try. Trust child with small responsibility. Avoid all criticism. Avoid getting hooked on self pity.

To identify a child's misbehaving goal, check your feelings and the child's response to your attempts at correction. Ask yourself:

- What are your own feelings toward your child's misbehavior?
- How do you react toward your child's misbehavior?
- How does your child respond to your attempts at correcting the misbehavior?

MY BLUEPRINT FOR IMPROVING MY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

1 In my parent-child relationship, I am specifically concerned that

2 My usual response to this specific parent-child relationship concern includes one or more of the following

(Place a check mark beside the concern(s) you consider most unacceptable)

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking, Lecturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Getting Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Threatening, Yelling
Warning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stating, Nagging | <input type="checkbox"/> Analyzing | <input type="checkbox"/> Criticizing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Giving Orders, Commands | <input type="checkbox"/> Punishing, Removing
Privileges, 'Shaming | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

3 I believe that, during the past week, in my own parent-child relationship I

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Acted More Calmly				Used Natural and Logical Consequences			
Acted Instead of Reacted				Stimulated Independence			
Listened				Used Rational Thinking			
Acted Firmly and Kindly				Stimulated Responsible Decision Making			
Encouraged Rather than Discouraged				Enjoyed My Parent-Child Relationship			
Communicated Love and Mutual Respect				Took Time For Myself			
Withdrew From Conflict That Didn't Involve Me							

4. The Atmosphere in our family has changed to one of:

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Friendliness				Self-Discipline			
Cooperation				Planning and Working Together			
Mutual Respect				Fun With Family Members			
Understanding				Distrust			
Tension and Strife				Confusion			
Involvement							

5. This week I learned:

6. I plan to change my parent-child behavior by:

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