

Kids Have a Purpose for Their Behavior

By Timothy D. Evans, PhD & Cameron W. Meredith, PhD

Parents often ask, “Why do kids behave as they do?” They are concerned with why they misbehave, and what, if anything, they can do about it.

One of the most helpful beliefs emerging from newer theories and practices in psychology is the belief that behavior is purposive. This belief is especially helpful in working with children to see that their behavior has a purpose.

This belief in purposive behavior is in sharp contrast to the traditional psychology that all behavior is caused and the causes are due to heredity and environment with emphasis on the past. This approach has not helped parents much because it is almost impossible to do anything about questionable causes in the environment or the past.

Purposive behavior means that people in their own ways create purposes and goals, and choose their behavior as they move into the future. We are not push by the past but pulled by our future goals. It is the believing that our goals pull us into action, rather than the past pushing or causing us to act. Although heredity and environment may influence behavior they do not cause behavior. The overriding factor is the choice we make to move us from a perceived felt minus to a perceived felt plus in the future.

Purposive behavior is often referred to as goals directed behavior. This approach takes a very hopeful view that people can change their goals and subsequent behavior, rather than be victims of their pasts or heredity.

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Without fully knowing their purposes, children are capable of deciding to continue their behavior that works and to discontinue behavior that does not work. Children want to find their place and feel they belong and find ways of behaving to accomplish these purposes.

Children who find useful ways of belonging are fortunate. When children are making contributions and feel they really count by the mere fact they exist, they become more responsible. These individuals usually have several quality adult relationships in their world. Their goals are to cooperate and be socially useful.

When children mistakenly believe they do not count, they become discouraged and attempt to find their place through useful contributions. They develop mistaken purposes and goals, and often resort to useless behavior. Surprisingly, it is in this area of misbehavior where an understanding of purposive behavior can help parents. Children who misbehave have attempted being useful but found it does not always work. In contrast, they have discovered misbehavior will accomplish certain goals and often with less work or effort.

Three common goals for misbehavior for children are to get attention, to dominate, and to secure undo service. For teenagers it tends to be for power, revenge or fun and excitement by violating the norms.

Children discover that misbehavior can command unlimited attention if not frustration from parents. They may just clown-around or aggravate their sibling. It may not always work but it's better to have negative attention than no recognition at all. The well-informed parents will not be impressed with such behavior and instead will move

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away when the children misbehave. Later they will involve children in meaningful ways and regularly encourage by expressing appreciation for contributing and cooperating behavior.

However, most of us parents can grow tired of the clowning around behavior or sibling fighting and immediately take steps to correct the behavior. After all, we have worked hard all day, are tired, and believe it's our duty to correct the faulty behavior in the child. As parents we are usually determined to control, dominate, and show the children who is boss. Consequently, children often conclude that they must dominate to get their own way or be crushed. Thus instead of seeking attention, they now misbehave for the purpose of defeating their parents. Every time the parent feels angry or frustrated the child knows they have won, regardless of the punishment.

It becomes a power struggle and it soon becomes obvious that everyone is losing. Well-informed parents will refuse to be opponents. They find ways to cooperate and have fun with their children in a win-win atmosphere. These parents know that no corrective effort is possible until they have established an encouraging and quality relationship with their children. And only then can they provide the guidance and firmness without the punishment to discipline their children.

Children can be ingenious at acting helpless, keeping their parents busy, and even getting their parents to feel sorry for them for the purpose of securing undo service. The child who has the parents jumping up at mealtime to get her a drink of water or more salad dressing can become a miserable relationship with everyone losing. Wise parents will stop being doormats and stop doing for children what they can do for themselves.

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The maintenance of order may require a certain degree of firmness especially with younger children. Yet firmness is not controlling the child. Firmness is our refusal to give in to undue demands of the child or indulge her with her every whim. We learn how to be firm with our own behavior.

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