

Hidden Messages of Misbehaviour

Young children communicate more with us by how they act than by what they say. They may have difficulty finding the words to express themselves, especially when they are upset or ill, or when they have problems. They express themselves with their behaviour, and in these situations, their behaviour is often unacceptable.

If the methods you are using to guide children's behaviour aren't working, it may be because you haven't understood the hidden messages. The child is trying to express a problem, but it's not working. If only children could explain themselves clearly with words!

Here are some of the things that children may be trying to tell you.

“I’m hungry (thirsty, tired, restless, uncomfortable).”

When children are physically uncomfortable, they have more difficulty controlling their behaviour. This is also true when they are coming down with a cold or an ear infection. You can help by:

- making sure that children get regular meals and snacks, enough rest and enough outdoor play
- making sure children's clothing fits well and that their diaper is dry

“I don’t know what you want me to do.” or “I don’t know how to do what you expect of me.”

You can help by:

- stating your expectations in a way children can understand
- demonstrating how to do it
- giving lots of opportunities to practise
- describing back to children what they are doing right when you see them following the rules

“The activities you have planned are too advanced (or not advanced enough) for my abilities right now.”

Children get anxious when you ask them to do things that are too difficult for their stage of development, for instance when you ask three year olds to sit and copy drawings for 10 minutes. On the other hand, they get bored when the activities are not stimulating and challenging enough, for instance when you give baby puzzles to four year olds. Whether they're anxious or bored, they often react by misbehaving. You can help by:

- learning about stages of development
- planning appropriate activities and providing appropriate toys and equipment
- planning activities that can be adjusted to different ages and abilities

“I’m at a stage of my development when I want to be my own person.” “I want to test the rules and see who is in control here.”

This is what two year olds are doing when they say “no” and four year olds when they repeatedly misbehave to see if the rules are the same every time. You can help by:

- giving them choices within the limits of your rules
- applying your rules consistently
- maintaining routines

“I have trouble moving from one activity to another and adjusting to changes.”

Some children have more difficulty with these things than others. We say they have a temperament that is sensitive to changes; this is something they were born with. You can help by:

- giving lots of warning when one activity will stop and another begin
- preparing children for new situations by talking about them beforehand. If possible, you could show them pictures, sing songs and read books about the new situation.

“I get easily overstimulated when there is a lot of noise and activity around me.”

When children get overstimulated, their brains can get so overloaded that they can't control their actions and they may become aggressive. You can help by:

- planning for regular periods of calming activities and rest during the day
- having a quiet corner where children can go when they start to feel overloaded

“My baby sister is sick this week and everyone’s worried about her.” or “It is hard for me to travel back and forth between Mummy’s house and Daddy’s house.”

When children are under stress, they tend to misbehave. Some stressful situations are temporary, and will resolve themselves on their own. Others are permanent and may cause chronic problems. You can help by:

- talking to children about the feelings they may be having
- listening to what children want to tell you about their feelings, without judging them or needing to “fix” things
- telling stories and reading books that relate to the situation the child is experiencing
- maintaining stable and predictable routines, as much as possible
- providing activities that will help children deal with their stress

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