

## Why Children Misbehave and How To Solve the Mystery

Undesirable behaviors occur for many reasons. In order to reduce problematic (negative) behaviors we first must come to an understanding of why they are occurring. I can't emphasize this enough – UNDERSTANDING **WHY** IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING. The WHY guides WHAT WE DO. As we always tell our staff *"In order to reduce a problematic (negative) behavior, we must first understand why the child is doing it, and then we must change our behavior accordingly."* There is almost always something going on in the child's world that spurs on negative behaviors. Many of those things, we as the adults can, and must change.

There are common themes among the reasons why children misbehave. These include:

1. ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE – Often children misbehave in order to escape or avoid having to do something undesirable (e.g., having to come inside after playing outside, having to sit to eat, having to go to bed, having to do school work).
2. TO GET ATTENTION – Some negative behaviors occur because the child wants attention and doesn't care whether it's positive or negative attention. Sometimes negative behaviors occur because s/he is not being attended to for positive behavior, and/or the child actually enjoys getting adults upset. One common example: there is nothing more fun than running away from an adult and being chased.
3. TO GET AN ITEM OR ACTIVITY – Some children discover that if they misbehave they get what they want. The classic example is throwing a temper tantrum at a store to get a toy or a piece of candy.
4. TO GET SENSORY INPUT – The negative behavior may itself provide enjoyable feelings (e.g., running, climbing, and hand flapping or rocking may be naturally reinforcing – they just feel good or make them feel better).

It is important to determine whether any or all of these are occurring in such a way that encourages the problematic behavior. But it is also important to understand whether:

1. The child understands that the negative behavior is unacceptable
2. The child understands what to do instead of the negative behavior (e.g., has the skills to do what we want to see)
3. The child has rational control over his/her behavior
4. Our expectations are appropriate for the child (e.g., Can s/he do what we want him or her to do?, Are we expecting too much?, Is the circumstance too overwhelming for the child?, etc.)
5. There is sufficient motivation/incentive for the child to do what we want? Is the reinforcement for the negative behavior greater than the reinforcement available for what we want to see?

Whenever I am asked to help staff or parents address a negative behavior – I always investigate all nine of these issues. I also look into the following things:

1. Have there been any major changes in the child's life (e.g., changes in living circumstances including where home is, the birth of a sibling, parental discord or separation, an absence or illness of a major care provider, more stress at home, and a major change in the routine of life)? It is important to note that even changes in daylight savings time or the chaos of the holidays can be very disruptive. Another major change, as is certainly the case now, includes major breaks from school.
2. Is the child suffering with an illness or unusual discomfort (e.g., an infection, GI Issues, dental issues)?
3. When did the behavior start?
4. What is the trend (e.g., is it getting worse)?
5. When is the problem behavior occurring the most and when is it least likely to occur?

It is important to investigate all of these issues and to do so thoroughly. Only through such an analysis are we likely to come to an understanding of WHY the behavior is occurring and what we can effectively do to reduce the behavior. Here are some Key Thoughts to keep in mind as you conduct an analysis of your child's problematic behavior:

1. Always try to look at the above issues from the child's perspective
2. Journal the behavior using the following guidelines on the *Negative Behavior Journal* (pg. 4)
3. LIMIT YOUR EFFORTS TO ONE BEHAVIOR AT A TIME.

The following guidelines are designed to help you journal the negative behavior. I highly advise that you document each occurrence of the negative behavior (on the following *Negative Behavior Journal*) immediately following the behavior, paying special attention to each of the following:

**Setting/Activity:**

- Specify:
  - The physical location of the difficulty
  - The activity the child was involved in prior to the difficulty
- Pay attention to the things going on that likely affect the child (e.g., demands, environmental stimuli, automatically reinforcing behaviors)

**Antecedent:**

- The antecedent is the stimuli or event that happened immediately prior to the negative behavior. It is important to note that the connection between the antecedent and the negative behavior are not always immediately clear. Journal the behavior over a period of time (at least one week).
- Examples of possible Antecedents (triggers):
  - A desirable activity was terminated (you took away something fun)
  - A desirable activity asked for by the child, but you said "No."
  - A demand for work was placed on the child
  - Something aversive (unpleasant) occurred in the environment or entered the environment
  - The child had to transition away from a highly desirable activity to a less preferred or unpleasant activity

**Behavior:**

- What specifically did the child do? (e.g., hit, scream, drop, head bang, bite, run away)

**Consequences:**

- From the child's perspective – what occurred in the environment in response to his or her behavior that may encourage or discourage the negative behavior itself? For example did the child:
  - Escape a demand or at least avoid it for a while because s/he engaged in the negative behavior?
  - Did s/he get to sustain involvement in the desired activity for a longer period of time because s/he engaged in the negative behavior?
  - Did s/he capture your attention (positive or negative) or get something s/he wanted because s/he engaged in the negative behavior?
  - Did s/he get pleasure out of agitating the care-provider or his/her peers?
  - Have to deal with you calmly asserting a demand with escalating insistence until s/he did what you wanted? (generally a good thing)

## Comments:

- Think about both the immediate circumstances and the long term implications of the interplay between the environment, the antecedents, his or her behavior, and the consequences of the negative behavior.
  - Is the environment set up to facilitate positive desirable behaviors (success) or negative behaviors (failure)?
  - Does the child know what positive behavior is expected in place of the negative behavior?
  - Is the reinforcement for the desired behavior strong enough to actually motivate him/her to do it?
  - Did my response increase or decrease the likelihood that the problematic behavior will occur again in the future?
  - What natural (automatic) reinforcers are at play here?
  - Really, what is the child getting from this situation?

Do the best you can to understand the WHY of the behavior and journal the negative behavior for at least one week. Doing so will help you understand more thoroughly the dynamics in place that contribute to the negative behavior and perhaps inadvertently encourage it. Use the following *Negative Behavior Journal* to record every occurrence of the negative behavior targeted for reduction. Try to be honest about your behavior and inconsistencies (if any). Nobody is perfect and this is a learning process. Success in this process comes when you:

- Behave as if you are a detective attempting to uncover the clues to a great mystery
- Make substantial efforts to enter the mindset of the child and attempt to look at the world through his or her eyes (and other senses)
- Accept that:
  - Most negative behaviors occur for a reason – they DO NOT tend to occur out of the blue (for no particular reason)
  - For each negative behavior there may be several reasons WHY – pay attention to the behavior over time and consider all possible functions of the behavior. For example the child may run away from you when you set a limit (tell him or her “NO!” ) or when they want your attention (e.g., want to play a cat and mouse chase game).
  - Children tend to do what works for them – We must learn WHY it works for them and then change WHAT works for them
  - There may be things in the environment that trigger the behavior (e.g., sounds, people, demands)
  - In order to change your child’s behavior, you will first likely have to change your own behavior and/or expectations
    - There may be things that you do that inadvertently encourage or maintain the behavior
    - There may be changes necessary with regard to your expectations
  - The most efficient way to change a negative behavior is to do the hard work to understand what is truly going on. You will also have to accept that it takes time and effort to understand WHY – there are no short cuts
  - Once you think you understand WHY, it takes time to develop a good intervention plan – take the time to do so carefully with investment and input from ALL care providers
  - A shared parenting plan is essential – inconsistency across parents will definitely weaken the intervention
  - If you are inconsistent in your dealings with the behavior across time, it will take even longer to reduce the negative behavior itself
  - Most negative behaviors serve a purpose for the child. Our job is to make the negative behavior less purposeful – and make a desirable behavior more purposeful for the child. If the negative behavior “works” for the child just now and then, it will take much longer to eliminate the negative behavior.
  - Behavior change takes time – your plan may start to work right away – but there is a good chance it will get worse for a while - so don’t give up right away – some children with very challenging behaviors are particularly skilled at getting the adults around them to give up on behavior change plans

THERE IS A LOT TO THINK ABOUT HERE. FOR GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT PLEASE REACH OUT TO JESS DOMST ([jdomst@TCLny.org](mailto:jdomst@TCLny.org)) OR GERRY GUILD ([gguild@TCLny.org](mailto:gguild@TCLny.org)) AS WE ARE AVAILABLE TO ASSIST YOU IN THIS PROCESS. Written by Dr. Gerald T. Guild, PhD, Licensed Psych.

# Negative Behavior Journal

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

	Setting/Activity	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Comments
Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____  <b><u>Intensity</u></b> Mild                      Severe 1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Rater: _____					
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