

The Problems Don't Go Away

Children don't always do what we would like them to do. Whether it's what parents would like them to do at home or what teachers would like them to do at school, children sometimes misbehave. Some children misbehave more often than others, but all children at one time or another don't do what we would like them to do. At home, they may not go to sleep when we want them to, clean up their toys as we asked them to do, or they may not stop playing the video game even though we told them three times to put it away. In the classroom, children may not pay attention to the lesson, may not stop talking to their friends when told it is not their turn to talk, or they may dawdle at their desk when it is time to get dressed for dismissal. It is a fact of our lives with children: they don't always comply with our wishes.

When children do misbehave, we often try to find a solution or a "fix" for the problem. Visit a local bookstore and you will find any number of books providing guidance as to how to shape, manage, and change the behavior of children. Other parents and teachers are also a source of suggestions for dealing with the noncompliant or misbehaving child. We believe that if we could only find the perfect technique for dealing with the problem, the problem will go away.

But in real life the problems never really go away; they just reappear in new forms. It is the nature of the beast - the human beast - that they are certain reoccurring problems or tensions that will rise time and time again. One of the major reoccurring tensions that is often at the heart of many instances of children's misbehavior is the tension between the individual and the social group. The child - and all of us for that matter - straddles those two states - she is an individual with an individual history, particular interests, desires, fears, etc., and at the same time is a member of various social groups (e.g., the family, a classroom, scout troop, sport team) which ask for (or require) adherence to certain customs and rules. At times these two states of her existence come into conflict.

And the conflict or tension can start quite early in a child's life. The crying infant may be wailing because she is hungry and wants to eat (individual desire) but you are trying to adjust the baby to a feeding schedule which meets the needs of the social group, the family. The toddler may throw a tantrum because he wants to keep playing with his toys when you are insisting it is bedtime. Similarly, the child in the kindergarten class wants to keep playing with the blocks despite that fact that it is time for the whole class of children to put the toys away, return to the their tables and eat their snacks.

This reoccurring tension between the individual and the social group doesn't end with the childhood years. We can all probably think of examples from our lives as adults

when our individual desires were in conflict with the norms or rules of a social group, whether that group was our workplace, our extended family, or the bowling league. The fact that these tensions are always with us in some form means that we shouldn't be looking for the one perfect solution to end the problem once and for all. The best we can do is cope with each situation as it arises, recognize that the tension exists, and figure out the compromise that can be reached between the demands of the social group and integrity of the individual, whether that individual is a child or ourselves.

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