



# Building Stepfamilies That Work®

## *The Four Goals of Misbehaviour*

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**Preamble:** According to Rudolf Dreikurs, there are four goals of misbehavior. They are attention, power, revenge and a display of inadequacy. According to the ***Systematic Training in Effective Parenting*** (STEP)\* approach to misbehavior, you can identify the goals of your child's misbehaviour by the feelings you experience when that misbehaviour occurs; and confirm your suspicion by observing how the child responds to your typical (knee-jerk) attempts to correct it.

### **Attention as the Goal of Misbehavior:**

In the case of attention, the parent feels **annoyed** and tends to react to the misbehavior with **reminders and coaxing**. Initially, the child stops the misbehavior, but shortly thereafter, the same behavior is resumed, or another disturbing behavior begins. Note that the parent's feeling is one of annoyance. Generally, the behavior is not offending enough to cause anger—just annoyance. Interruptions during phone calls, whining, nagging in the supermarket, and interrupting conversations are typical attention seeking misbehaviors that cause feelings of annoyance in parents.

### **The Keys:**

1. By focusing on his own feelings, the parent gives him/herself time to cool down and avoid a knee-jerk reaction to the misbehavior (that is most likely to be counterproductive in the long run.) By recognizing his/her own feelings as well as his child's goals, the parent regains control of the situation and, then, addresses the situation calmly, and in a rational, purposeful, and productive way.
2. Look for alternative reactions to the attention-seeking behaviors, such as ignoring the behavior, and giving attention for positive behavior when the child is behaving appropriately. Remember that reminding, punishing, rewarding and coaxing are undue attention for misbehaviour, and these knee-jerk methods of responding to it will only serve to perpetuate it—and may even intensify it.

### **The Goal of Power:**

If you're feeling **angry** or **threatened** in the face of your child's misbehaviour, the likely goal of that misbehaviour is power.

If, in response to your child's misbehaviour you find yourself **punishing, fighting back, or giving in**, and your child continues to misbehave, defy you, or does what you've asked slowly or sloppily, and you're feeling anger, you are in the classic power struggle.

### **The Keys:**

1. Know the rules for dealing with a power struggle. If you stay invested in the power struggle, you will fuel the battle—and it is very likely to escalate.
2. To defuse a power struggle, “back off”. For example, give yourself a timeout by saying, “I’m too angry to talk to you right now, so I’m going to give myself a timeout to cool down. I’ll be back in five minutes to discuss the situation with you. In the mean time, let’s both think about how we could handle it in a more respectful way.”
3. The parent: a) behaves as an adult by speaking very respectfully to the child, b) identifies the feeling of anger; and c) models good anger management.
4. Give these kids real power by holding family meetings where they can have genuine input into the rules that are put into place, and meaningfully participate in decision-making.

### **The Goal of Revenge:**

The goal of revenge is likely to appear when a child can't win in a power struggle, so he/she attempts to ‘get even’. Revenge is likely to be expressed by a child saying or doing something hurtful. (Sometimes the goal of revenge may be expressed by the child’s staring angrily at the parent.) In these situations, the parent is likely to feel **hurt**, **angry** or **guilty** and may **try to get even**.

### **The Keys:**

1. To avoid the no-win struggle, the parent must refuse to ‘feel hurt’ and/or anger, and retrain from indulging in hurtful responses—either actively or passively.
2. Don’t punish these kids. They are hurting, and their “hurt needs to be heard in order to be healed”.
3. Acknowledge that the child’s words or actions were hurtful; then link their hurtful words/actions to their own hurt by saying: “That was a very hurtful thing to do/say, and it genuinely hurt my feelings.... People who act in hurtful ways are usually feeling hurt themselves. Tell me, what has been hurting you?”

### **Display of Inadequacy:**

Displaying inadequacy is the fourth goal of misbehavior. In these situations, it seems that everyone has given up. The parent/teacher/coach **agrees with the child's**

**expression of inadequacy**, and, as a consequence, **expects nothing from the child**. Dealing with a discouraged child is the hardest of the four goals of misbehavior and takes the longest to effect change.

### **The Keys:**

1. These kids need success experiences, so make sure the tasks you are presenting them have been broken down into manageable “bites”. Consider teaching them how to perform the necessary task (or subtask ) if there is any doubt about their knowledge of how to perform the task appropriately.
2. Refuse to give up. Do not pity. Use ‘encouragement’. [Here, encouragement means fostering the kid’s internal sense of accomplishment. For example, you might say: “You must feel very pleased with yourself for getting that done”—rather than: “I’m so proud of you for getting that done.” or “You made me so happy (by getting that done).”]
3. Notice the child’s strengths. Catch them being “good”, accomplishing something/anything.
4. Remember: A child who is discouraged has behavior that screams, "I want to be alone."

**In review**, the four goals of misbehavior are attention, power, revenge, and a display of inadequacy. You can a) identify these goals by examining the feelings that are provoked within you when these misbehaviours occur, and b) confirm them by observing your child’s response to your customary (knee-jerk) method of intervening. Once you have accurately identified the goal of your child’s misbehaviour, you can apply the techniques reported here to bring about more positive behaviour.

4 goals of misbehaviour. rtf Feb 2008

\* Don Dinkmeyer, Sr., Gary D. McKay and Don Dinkmeyer, Jr. (1979) *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (STEP) New York: Random House

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# Building Stepfamilies That Work®

## *The Four Goals of Misbehaviour: A Summary\*\**

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The Goal of Misbehaviour	Your Feeling Cue	Your Impulse	Child's Response	Your Strategy
<b>Attention</b>	Annoyed Irritated Worried Guilty	Reminding. Coaxing. Doing things for the child he could do for himself.	Stops behaviour temporarily, but soon resumes with the same or another annoying behaviour. <b>[Hear:</b> Notice me-involve me.	Ignore misbehaviour. Attend to desired behaviours. Avoid special service. "Say it" only once and then act. Set up routines. Plan special time. Redirect by involving the child in a useful task. Touch without words. Set up nonverbal signals.
<b>Power</b>	Anger Provoked Challenged Threatened Defeated	To push back. To fight back. Thinking: "You can't get away with that" or "I'll make you behave" or Giving (i.e., caving) in.	Intensifies the misbehaviour. Complies but defiantly. Feels he's won if the adult appears upset. Exercises passive power. <b>[Hear:</b> Let me help-give me choices.]	Don't escalate. Defuse. Take a time out. Model good anger management. Suggest a time for a rational discussion. Acknowledge that you can't "make" him, and ask for his help. Offer a limited choice. Be firm and kind. Act, don't talk. Let routines "be the boss". Get help from the child to set a few reasonable limits. Follow through on agreement. Redirect to positive power. Hold class/family meetings.
<b>Revenge</b>	Hurt Disappointed Disbelieving Disgusted	To retaliate. To get even. Thinking: "How could you do this to me?"	Retaliate Hurt others Damage property Get even Escalates the misbehaviour or Chooses another 'weapon'. <b>[Hear:</b> Help me – I'm hurting.]	Refuse to feel (your) hurt. Don't retaliate (passively or aggressively). Acknowledge their hurtful act and link it to the likelihood that they must be hurting. Explore their hurt. Use "reflective listening". Share your feelings. Apologize. Avoid punishment and retaliation. Show you care.
<b>Inadequacy</b>	Pity (i.e., I agree, you are) Hopeless Helpless Inadequate	Over-helping. Expecting nothing. Giving up. Doing the child's tasks.	Retreats further Acts passively Doesn't improve Doesn't respond <b>[Hear:</b> Have faith in me – don't give up.]	Don't pity. Use "encouragement"—notice strengths, find successes to celebrate, and draw attention to how the accomplishment makes the CHILD feel good. Take time for training if necessary. Break the task into smaller steps until child is successful. Don't give up. Build on his interests. Encourage, encourage, encourage.

\*\* This information is based upon Systematic Training for Effectiveness in Parenting and many other sources.

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