



# MAKING CHILDREN MIND WITHOUT LOSING YOURS

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*How to Bring out the Best in Kids  
by Doing What Is Best for Them*

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## Chapter 2

# WHY KIDS MISBEHAVE

## *Understanding Why Kids Do What They Do*

Since all behaviors serve a purpose, we must assume that children misbehave for a reason. The challenge is to understand why they do what they do. When a child does something, that action is usually motivated by a specific intention. We adults give children clues as to how we expect them to behave, and children either meet these expectations or rebel against them. By recognizing children's individual needs, we can best deal with their behavior and meet them where they are, rather than expect them to transform immediately into what we want them to be.

### HOW DO CHILDREN LEARN BEHAVIOR?

#### 1. Children learn through birth order.

Birth order greatly affects how your child perceives and understands reality. Whether a child is a perfectionistic, achieving, cautious *firstborn*... a mediating, independent *middleborn*... or a personable, manipulative, show-stealing *youngest child*... the child's birth order will affect how he or she develops a place in the family, and later on, in the world. Birth order allows for tendencies—there are no behavioral guarantees—but it can provide valuable insight into why children act the way they act.

Example: The teacher gives an assignment to write a five-page paper. The firstborn will barrage the teacher with questions—“Is it to be double-spaced? What size font? Would you like a cover page on it?” The middle child will think, “Oh, good! I can get all my friends together and we can work on it.” The lastborn will think, “Not due until Friday? Great! Thursday night I'll get on it. Actually, I'll get Mom on it!”

Each child views his or her family from a different viewpoint, and this affects the child's perception of what is true. Much research has been done on birth order and how it affects personality and behavior. Familiarity with children's reality perceptions will help you deal with them as individuals. Understanding children as singular people with various and particular needs is essential to the implementation of reality discipline. It has always amazed me how three little cubs could come from the same den and yet be so very different from one another! I'm sure this adds to the challenge of being an educator and parent!

The following charts will help you better understand the principles of birth order and learn to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of your children—and even yourself.

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF FIRSTBORNS

TYPICAL TRAITS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Leadership ability	Take charge, know what to do	May undermine the initiative of those who lean on them too much or may come off as too overbearing or aggressive
Aggressive	Command respect; others want to follow their unflinching leadership	Can run roughshod over others; may be insensitive and tend to be selfish; too focused on the goal and not enough on the feelings of others
Compliant	Cooperative, easy to work with, good team player	Can be taken advantage of, bullied, bluffed
Perfectionistic	Always do things right and leave no stone unturned; tend to be on time and on schedule	Tend to criticize themselves and/or others too much; never satisfied; may procrastinate because they fear they cannot do a "good enough" job
Organized	Have everything under control, always on top of things; tend to be on time and on schedule	May worry too much about order, process, and rules and not be flexible when it's needed; may show real impatience with anyone who is disorganized or not as meticulous; can be upset by surprises
Driver	Ambitious, enterprising, energetic; willing to sacrifice to be a success	Put themselves or those they work with under too much stress and pressure
List maker	Set goals and reach them; tend to get more done in a day than others; planning the day is a must	May become boxed in; too busy with to-do lists to see the big picture and what needs to be done right now
Logical	Known as straight thinkers; can be counted on not to be compulsive or to go off half-cocked	May believe they're always right and fail to pay attention to the more intuitive opinions of others
Scholarly	Tend to be voracious readers and accumulators of information and facts; good problem solvers who think things through	May spend too much time gathering facts when there are other things that need to be done; may be so serious they fail to see the humor in situations when humor is desperately needed

From THE NEW BIRTH ORDER BOOK by Dr. Kevin Leman, Revell Publishers

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ONLY CHILDREN

TYPICAL TRAITS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Confident, self-assured	Trust own opinion, not afraid to make decisions	May be self-centered from being treated by parents as “center of universe;” also fearful, ambivalent about trying new things
Perfectionistic	Always do things right and leave no stone unturned to do a thorough job	Tend to criticize themselves and/or others too much; never satisfied; may procrastinate because they fear they cannot do a “good enough” job
Organized	Have everything under control; always on top of things; tend to be on time and on schedule	May worry too much about order, process, and rules, and not be flexible when it’s needed; may show real impatience with anyone who is disorganized or not as meticulous; can be upset by surprises
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<b>STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF MIDDLE CHILDREN</b>
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<b>TYPICAL TRAITS</b>	<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b>
<b>Grew up feeling squeezed and rootless</b>	<b>Learned not be spoiled</b>	<b>May be rebellious because they don't feel they fit in</b>
<b>Reasonable expectations</b>	<b>Because life hasn't always been fair, they are unspoiled, realistic</b>	<b>Being treated unfairly may have made them suspicious, cynical, even bitter</b>
<b>Social lion</b>	<b>Relationships are very important; they make friends and tend to keep them</b>	<b>Friends can be too important and not offending them may cloud judgment on key decisions</b>
<b>Independent thinker</b>	<b>Willing to do things differently, take a risk, strike out on their own</b>	<b>May appear to be bullheaded, stubborn, unwilling to cooperate</b>
<b>Compromising</b>	<b>Know how to get along with others; can be skilled at mediating disputes or negotiating disagreements</b>	<b>Can be seen as willing to have peace at any price; others may try to take advantage of them</b>
<b>Diplomatic</b>	<b>Peacemakers; willing to work things out; great at seeing issues from both sides</b>	<b>May hate confrontation; often choose not to share their real opinions and feelings</b>
<b>Secretive</b>	<b>Can be trusted with sensitive information; know how to keep secrets</b>	<b>May fail to admit it when they need help—"It's just too embarrassing!"</b>

From THE NEW BIRTH ORDER BOOK by Dr. Kevin Leman, Revell Publishers

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF LASTBORNS

TYPICAL TRAITS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<b>Charming</b>	<b>Likable, fun to be around, easy to talk to</b>	<b>Manipulative, even a little flaky; seeming to be too slick and a bit unbelievable</b>
<b>People oriented</b>	<b>Read others well and know how to relate and work well one on one or in small groups; social settings and events are their cup of tea</b>	<b>May come across as undisciplined, prone to talk too much and too long; the kind who talk a good game but can't always produce</b>
<b>Tenacious</b>	<b>Keep on coming with tireless persistence, not taking "no" for an answer</b>	<b>May push too hard because they see things only their way</b>
<b>Affectionate and engaging</b>	<b>Caring, lovable, wanting to help; like to get strokes and to give them</b>	<b>Can be gullible, easily taken advantage of; make decisions too much on feelings and not enough on thought</b>
<b>Uncomplicated</b>	<b>Appear relaxed, genuine, and trustworthy; no hidden agenda</b>	<b>May appear to be absentminded; a little out of focus—like an airhead</b>
<b>Attention seeking</b>	<b>Entertaining and funny, know how to get noticed</b>	<b>May appear self-centered, unwilling to give others credit; having a big ego, temperamental, spoiled and impatient</b>

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## **2. Children learn by taking power trips.**

Children need you, but children don't need you all the time. If you are never apart from your children, then when you are eventually separated from them, the parting may be difficult. In addition, the constant presence of mom or dad or teacher teaches the younger child that tantrums and crying get attention. For the older child it teaches them to be sneaky, to lie about anything to get away from the parent or teacher and have some autonomy. As a result, the child learns to manipulate his parents and authority figures with negative behavior. When he sees that any type of behavior gets attention, he will tend to repeat it over and over again. Tears, tantrums, shyness, anger, sulking and pity parties are all designed to elicit attention from others, especially adults who are in authority.

When you isolate a child, you take her out of her power position and separate her from the person she is trying to influence—namely, you. When a child loses her audience, then her behavior ceases to be effective. In a situation outside the home, such as a classroom, shopping mall or birthday party, simply step over the “tantrum” child and walk away. The temptation to yell back, become embarrassed or swat the child may be great, but once little Sarah or Dylan sees that you are not giving in to their manipulative behavior, they will learn that tantrums are not the way to obtain the attention they desire. Also, they will learn that mom, dad and teacher will not put up with this sort of behavior. The reality is, the world that children are going to function in as grown-ups does not appreciate or tolerate tantrums. The sooner children learn this, the better.

## **3. Children learn by watching YOU.**

Significant adults are role models for children. Children first look to their parents as examples of how to behave, but soon the other adults in their lives also become examples. Younger children look up to their teachers, but as they get older, their friends become a big influence in their lives. Children are sponges, and they absorb much of what goes on in the world around them. You may tell a child whatever you wish, but your actions have a far greater impact than your words.

Through your willingness to admit mistakes and imperfections, you are teaching children that it is okay to be less than perfect. Modeling honesty opens avenues for discussion and strengthens relationships. Work to be a good example, and be consistent. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you must be perfect. One of the best things you can do is to apologize when you blow it (and you will blow it occasionally). There is nothing wrong with saying that you're sorry to your students or your children. If you were grumpy with your class today, start tomorrow with a simple apology. This shows children that you're human, and you'll be modeling the behavior you'd like to see in them.

**Develop a different game plan and remember that every child is different.**

Children learn in ways other than the ones listed here, but these can give you a starting point for dealing with the children in your life. Get to know children as individuals and remember that each child has a different strategy or “game plan” for success.

### **THREE REASONS WHY CHILDREN MISBEHAVE**

#### **1. To gain attention**

The goal of attention-seeking behavior is precisely that: to receive attention, whether positive or negative. From the time we’re able to cry, we all seek attention in life. As babies grow into children, they seek praise, encouragement and reward through positive behavior. If, for some reason, that positive behavior goes unnoticed, then a child instinctively turns to a negative behavior in order to get the desired recognition. For example, two children, Patrick and Marcy, sit side by side in their classroom at school. Marcy arrives at class on time, does her work quietly, raises her hand when she wants to speak and treats her classmates with respect. Patrick, however, frequently arrives late, blurts out without being called on, taps his pencil, hums and interrupts his classmates. Which student gets the majority of the teacher’s attention? Patrick, of course. His teachers spend most of the day giving him attention, albeit negative, and attention is what he is seeking. His behavior, therefore, does not change. In addition, his perception could even be that he is being rewarded for his actions, even though they are inappropriate.

Children can develop the faulty idea that they only matter when they are being noticed. While there exists a natural desire to be noticed, this desire must be appropriately addressed. When dealing with an attention-seeking child, sit down with him, address the behavior and try to assess what is motivating his behavior. In some cases, a professional assessment may be appropriate.

#### **2. To acquire power**

A child that seeks to control her relationship with you through manipulative and controlling behavior is using that behavior as powerful leverage. Whining, pouting, crying, teasing, tantrums and other such behaviors are designed to get you—the parent, the teacher, administrator—to do what the child wants.

*Mom takes Jennifer to the shopping mall on Saturday. Jennifer spots a denim jacket that she just must have because everyone at her school has one like it—and if she doesn’t get one, she will die! Mom bought Jennifer a new jacket just two months ago; it’s perfectly good, and she tells Jennifer that she is not buying her another coat. So Jennifer wheedles, whines and argues all afternoon pressing her case. Finally, as they are getting ready to leave the mall, Jennifer stops and screams, “You’re so mean! You never get me anything I want! I hate you!” Mom—exhausted, frustrated, hurt and angry—caves in and thrusts her wallet at Jennifer. She tells Jennifer, “Fine, get the coat! I’ll be in the car!”*



Not only does Jennifer get the coat, she also gains the power position in the relationship. Her mother sent the message that she can be controlled and manipulated with negative behavior. The next time Jennifer wants something from her mother, she is very likely to use negative behavior to get it. Mom allowed Jennifer to be the authority in the relationship, resulting in an unfortunate disservice to Jennifer.

### **3. To exact revenge**

A vengeful child seeks to hurt others often because he feels that life has hurt him. This behavior is generally motivated by anger and sadness, and the desire to lash out in response to personal hurt is a normal human reaction. When a vengeful child seeks to hurt others, this action must be addressed immediately. A child who has been hurt by life and feels defeated needs a loving authority figure more than ever. We as adults must not give up on this kind of child. This does not mean that he should get everything he wants as compensation for the hurt he has suffered. It means that he needs a strong dose of reality discipline. A loving, firm, authoritative hand can help a revenge-seeking child see that not everything in life hurts.

**Children need a safe place, like a home or a classroom, in which they can make mistakes so they can learn from them and move forward.**

### **WHAT CAN WE DO? HERE ARE SOME PRACTICAL TIPS!**

1. Develop consequences for unacceptable behavior. Don't be a yo-yo! Be consistent! Children need to know what you expect and what to expect from you.
2. Make children accountable for their behavior. If children do not learn accountability at home, they will struggle when they are forced to learn it in their classrooms, jobs and relationships.
3. Provide boundaries for children. They need rules and restrictions, even if they are unwritten. Children find security in structure and routine.
4. Take swift action and do not waffle, for it is action that gets a child's attention. The consequence of a child's action should be directly related to the offense, and discipline should occur quickly. Discipline that is delayed too long after the offense is diluted and loses its desired effect. Remember, do not discipline in anger.
5. Reject the behavior but love the child. Explain to the child that while her behavior is inappropriate, it is the behavior that is unacceptable, not the child. And let the child know that you will hold no grudges. Children have a great fear that adult authority figures will blame them and hold grudges against them for a long time, so they feel forced to live and function under a cloud of anxiety, wondering just when the cloud is going to burst and they are going to get "rained" on again.
6. Nurturing does not mean enabling, so resist the urge to "fix" everything for children. They need to learn that the world is an imperfect place. Nurturing involves loving, training and encouraging children to develop behavior patterns that will enable them to be successful and respected in life.

## IN CONCLUSION

Children will try all varieties of behavior in order to get what they want. Whatever the motivation for a child's action may be, that behavior is born from a desire to get your attention, gain power or exact revenge. As you get to know the children in your life as individuals, you will discover more about their unique personalities, varied incentives and motivating strategies. You will see them as special people—not carbon copies of yourself.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. We must model the behavior we want to see in our children. What style of behavior are you modeling? Is it in line with what you want to see in your children? Discuss ways to model the behavior you want to see. Be specific.
2. Sometimes children misbehave because they feel we expect them to misbehave. Recall from the video the example of the children visiting the grocery store with their mother who showered them with warnings (no running, don't whine or beg for candy) before they even entered the building. How could that mother have used reality discipline? Discuss specific ideas.
3. Children misbehave for three basic reasons: for *attention*, *power* and *revenge*. Discuss what type of child exhibits each of these behaviors. How are these problems manifesting themselves in your home or classroom?
4. Every child is different. Do you tend to treat all children the same or differently, according to his or her needs? Discuss ways you can work to meet children "where they are."
5. Why do you think parents have such difficulty allowing children to fail? Discuss.
6. We have discussed ways that children differ according to their birth order. What is your birth order? How do you think it affects your discipline style? Do you think it affects how you relate to children? Discuss this with your group to see if you share common traits with others of your birth order.
7. Reality discipline focuses on actions, not words. What are some ways that you give verbal warnings rather than use action? Think of specific ways you can use actions instead of words. Discuss with your group and be specific.
8. What did you learn today that you can put into practice immediately? Share with your group.

NOTE: To learn more about birth order, read Dr. Leman's THE NEW BIRTH ORDER BOOK, available from Revell Publishers.

