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Dear Parents of Young Children – The “Why” of Behavior in Discipline?  
Michigan State University Extension Service  
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# Dear Parents of young children

## The "Why" Of Behavior In Discipline

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"WHAT SHALL I DO when my child won't mind?" What do you do?

Probably you do one of several things. You may lose your temper and act quickly, you may feel that you should do something but you don't quite know what, you may not even notice the behavior or you may notice and decide to ignore it.

Whatever you do you hope that you are acting in the best interests of the child and giving him the best kind of help. In the long run we want a child to learn from any experience so that his behavior will continue to improve.

One of the ways to accomplish this is to pause before you act, to look before you leap. If we could just stop and think, "Why did he do this?" rather than, "What must I do about it?" we would be more apt to be on the right track.

We need to sharpen our judgment about the behavior of children. We need to study children as we study other fascinating subjects. When Susan repeatedly interrupts as her mother is reading a story to her, why does she do this? Is Susan disrespectful and unappreciative? Or is Susan tired from sitting too long? Are there too many distractions in the room? Or is the story beyond her age interest? Whatever you decide as to why she is interrupting will determine what you do about it.

### How to Avoid Some Errors

We can be mistaken about what causes behavior and as a result mistaken as to what to do about it. In looking for possible causes of behavior of little children (and we may not always find the cause) there are certain kinds of errors that one may fall into.

To avoid common errors in judging behavior—

### Consider More Than One Cause

Sometimes we may settle on one cause when there may be several. It may happen like this—

Out in the back yard Alec is seen to push Tommy off the tricycle. Tommy's mother rushes to rescue him before he is hurt.

On the basis of what was seen the mother may conclude that Alec is selfish. If this be true, the mother might decide to put Alec through a course of treatment to cure his selfishness.

Actually, in this case before the mother did anything she discovered that the two boys were acting out a play they had seen on television in which the sheriff pulled the "bad man" off the horse. Throwing Tommy off the tricycle was part of a pre-arranged plan with the tricycle substituting for the horse.

With this discovery it was the mother's judgment to do nothing but watch for further signs that might mean their play was becoming a little too realistic.

Studying this situation further we might suppose that Alec could have

pushed Tommy off the bike for any one of a number of reasons, as . . .

—Tommy may have promised Alec a turn and Alec became impatient.

—Alec may have longed for a bike like this and being deprived of it was hard to bear.

—Alec may have had a series of frustrating events preceding this situation and just plain "took it out on Tommy."

—Alec may have been coming down with a cold.

In each case one's judgment as to what to do about it will vary. All the factors which were possibly a part of the behavior should be taken into consideration.

### Rely on Sound Authority

We tend to accept heresy or a chance remark of a questionable authority. A single statement heard or read is often singled out and given a meaning which was not originally intended. One of these chance remarks may start as, "I hear it is sometimes all right to spank children." This remark may have been made about a particular child in a particular situation. This may appear as a bright spot on the horizon to parents already struggling with discipline. Repeated several times this chance remark may become:

"All children need spanking."

"Spanking should be a regular part of discipline."

"Children can not grow up satisfactorily without being spanked."

"Spanking children will mean rearing a generation that is better behaved."





Joan's parents are concerned because she does not hold her fork straight at the table. It wobbles around and she holds it in a most awkward manner. This bothers the parents because Joan's older sister at the same age was able to manage her fork skillfully.



Pursuing the question of why Joan is having difficulty should cause one to look into the facts as to when most children are able to manage a fork. It is known for example that large muscles develop before small muscles, that holding a fork, getting the food on it, and raising the fork to the mouth, demand coordination of muscles. Skill comes about with practice and is different for children at different ages.

What Joan's sister did at the same age will have little or no relationship. It may take Joan longer to learn this skill but it will not necessarily mean that she is slower or less able than her sister.

Sometimes we judge behavior on the basis of what we did as a child. We may say, "Oh, she is behaving just like I did, or like her aunt, or her grandfather." In reality the factor which caused you to act in a certain way may be quite different than the set of factors in the environment in which your child is living today.

#### Stay Calm, Appraise Fairly

In looking for causes of behavior it is well not to magnify causes.

One of the ways of understanding and interpreting children's behavior today is through studying children's drawings or paintings. While this method is very helpful, in some cases too hasty conclusions may be drawn. For example, if a child uses dark bold

colors one might be tempted to assume that his life is stormy and unhappy. Other reasons for drawing this way might be that the child simply likes dark colors, that the dark colored crayons were handy, or that he saw another child making this kind of drawing.

In other words, we should not become alarmed over any one instance of behavior. We should not think that every act has some hidden meaning.

In judging behavior it is also well to be aware of exaggerated forms of behavior that occur too frequently and continue over a long period of time. In other words, if we cannot note improvement in such behavior it might be well to consult a professional person who is trained to help you.

This letter suggests that:

Improving our judgment about the behavior of children will help us to deal more wisely with it.

*Louise K. Backus*

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Statements like these may be either untrue or unproved. There are many reliable sources of information today based on longtime research with children. This eliminates much of the guessing about children at least in certain areas. It is both unnecessary and unwise to depend on hearsay in the management of children. Making use of reliable sources and studying about children is more dependable.

#### Look at Total Behavior

We must avoid labeling a child on the basis of a single act. For example,

—Linda who is four years old insists that strangers came in the house and ate up the cookies. The crumbs on Linda's face give her away. Linda's mother is afraid that since she told a lie she can not be trusted.

—Sammy threw mud on the window at the next door neighbors. The Browns say that Sammy is a mean child and will probably always be so.

—Cynthia, age 2½, recites nursery rhymes fluently. Her parents feel that she is an extremely talented child.

*Understanding Your Young Child.* Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Home Office, New York.

*Your Child from One to Six.* Federal Security Agency, Children's Bureau Publication No. 30—Revised 1942.

A child is neither untrustworthy, destructive, or brilliant on the basis of a single act. Inquiring into the why in each of these cases one might find that Linda is working her 4-year-old imagination overtime, that Sammy is adding his bit to the neighborhood feud, or that Cynthia's mother has spent lots of time teaching her to recite nursery rhymes.

Labeling a child as completely mean or aggressive or shy is to give too little attention to why he acted that way in each case. It would also fail to take into account how such characteristics might change as a child grows and develops.

#### Study the Immediate Situation

We may be tempted to draw conclusions from a previous experience.

Fortunate indeed is the child who lives somewhere out in the country away from all the noise of the city, a natural growing up with the out-of-door. Can you plan a safe journey for your child out into the fields, so that he can listen and look at trees, at the flowers and grasses, at the clouds as they move across the sky?

Remember some of the things that used to be fun?

- Make a leaf garland by placing the tip of one leaf on the base of another, pinning them together with a small bit of twig or pine needle. What a gorgeous headdress for a fairy princess!

- Garlands can also be made out of sweet clover by looping each stem around and tying it to the blossom end of another clover.

- Make a dandelion chain by sticking one end of the hollow stem of a dandelion inside the other to make the links of a chain. Caution—remember dandelions stain.

- Children will love to carry home dried pods or flowers, cocoons or a spear of wheat—"junk" or "cherished possessions"?

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