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When it comes to behaviour, most parents want the same result – a happy, well behaved child. Then why is behaviour an area we often struggle with? The reasons are numerous and one persons idea of a well behaved child may differ widely from another's, based on their own upbringing and cultural norms. However, there are basic principles such as respect for adults, respect for their peers, doing what they are asked to do, safety precautions etc. which cross all cultural norms. How can you prevent misbehaviour from happening and instil in your child good behaviour? There are a number of issues to examine:

Here's looking at you.

“He/she is the splitting image of his father/mother,” is a phrase that we all probably heard a many times. However, it is not only in the physical form that children resemble their parents; the similarities also follow through in behaviour, which, as a parent, is a bit of a disturbing revelation to face, if you are having problems with your child. The reality that your child's misbehaviour is only learnt from his environment is not an easy one to deal with. The point however, is not to beat yourself up – but rather to face the possibility and the responsibility that your child's behaviour may be linked to yours.

“We learn through copying from those around us. Children use role models in forming their identities. They often get labelled as being badly behaved, or as having ADHD,

when what is actually happening is a mirror of their troubled environment,” is a comment from psychologist Yvonne Dobson.

If your toddler witness you and your partner yelling at each other and possibly worse, its not surprising then that in a conflict situation he will resort to the same behaviour, when things aren't going his way. You are the people he loves and your child wants to be like you. If you sear at every other motorist, your child will learn that its ok to swear at their playmates.

If the parents are possibly part of the cause of a child's misbehaviour, then working with the child in isolation from the parents, may not get the desired result.

“The most effective way of dealing with a child who has behavioural problems, is active involvement from both parents, whether they are together or separated,” says psychologist Janet Bytheway. “It's not about blaming, but rather unravelling the family history to find clues as to why a child might behave in a certain way.”

Christy has two children, Daniella who is five and James is two. “I went to see a psychologist because while Daniela was angelic, James was the complete opposite. Destructive, disobedient, a biter, you name it. After the initial assessment, my partner and I were called in for feedback and while chatting, it became clear that we were really the ones in need of help. A couple of tough years followed but now I am so grateful for having stuck with it, as I feel a different person. The biggest reward and confirmation of the effort was seeing on James's report card the words: *one of life's natural little gentlemen*. It wasn't easy and at times took a huge amount of courage but I believe than through healing many of my own wounds, I healed the family unit as a whole.”

If you are having problems, the first point of call (although by far the most difficult,) would be to look at yourself and your partner, before looking for other possible causes.

These are hard questions to answer honestly and the truth is that none of us are perfect, however a little insight into your Achilles' heel, will help you understand not only yourself but your child as well.

Some questions to reflect on are:

1. What sort of role model do I set my child? – Am I positive, spontaneous, accepting etc?
2. How disciplined am I? Do I do what I say I am going to do when I say I will do it?
3. Am I over-controlling or dominating, seldom allowing my child to make age appropriate decisions? Is “no” more common in my vocabulary than “yes” (Test yourself for a day.)
4. How much of wanting my child to be a certain way, is a projection of my own need for things to look good?
5. Do I swing from being over, to under controlling?
6. Do I seek the closeness which I do not feel from my partner from my child, thus causing confusion in the child who is not sure if he is a friend/partner or toddler?
7. Do I lack respect for my child’s boundaries or allow him to invade mine?
8. Am I fulfilled in my life and if not what steps can I take to enrich my life, which will give my child a wonderful role model?
9. How do I deal with my negative feelings? Do I withdraw and sulk or do I bottle them up and explode inappropriately. What can I do to help myself?
10. Do I have too many rules or none at all? Do I enforce them consistently?
11. Do I ensure that my child has things to stimulate him in his environment? If a child is bored he will look for things to entertain himself.
12. How often do I spend with my child when I am not just with him but actually fully focused on him. Even a few minutes of undivided time, when you are fully present, can go a long way towards creating a secure and happy child.

If you feel that these questions have raised doubts, then get help in solving the problem, in doing so you not only heal yourself, but also those around you.

Your home – hazardous or harmless?

Having the right environment for your child can help prevent certain behaviour from happening. What to a child is simply fulfilling a natural curiosity, may create an extreme sense of humour failure for you, when you find lipstick scrawled all over the walls.

Children of this age are natural explorers which could lead them into dangerous exploits. This will naturally result in your “no” count rising. So plan ahead. Look for possible problem areas, such as your make-up table, glass jars in your floor level cupboards etc. and make your home potentially hazard free.

I child proofed all my cupboards, which went a long way to keeping the peace. However, I did leave the vegetable cupboard open and the children knew that was “their” cupboard. Feeling that they had some power in this area, gave me some free time and them many hours happily sorting potatoes and oranges. Toddlers, once they can speak, can be taught which areas they are allowed and which are no-go.

Creating an entertaining environment.

Boredom frequently leads to misbehaviour, so with a bit of planning you can prevent this. A safe place to play outside is also extremely helpful. I believe my son’s drumming skills go back to the days when he banged out a serious beat on my pots. Sure the din was a bit hectic but the payoff of a happy child was worth it.

Things you may think of having on hand are:

1. A climbing frame/slide
2. Plastic mini bike
3. A tolerant pet
4. Empty boxes
5. Balls
6. Starch paint – use ½ cup flour and add a cup of boiling water. When it’s cooled I add child safe paint or food colouring to create colours. If you add a bit of salt it helps make it last in the fridge for a few days.

7. Old magazines
8. Paper/crayons
9. Old baking equipment to “make” sand cakes etc.
10. Leave a pile of sand outside, (covered at night to prevent the local cats from using it as a toilet,) buckets, shovels and other containers to explore.
11. Toys such as tractors dump trucks etc that work well with sand.

Use their desire to mirror your role to your advantage

Children love to copy their parents and older siblings. What might be a boring chore for you can be an area of immense fascination for a toddler. Get your child involved. If you are washing up give them a few plastic bits and pieces to wash and dry. Compliment them on a good job. Make them feel as if they are contributing to the general running and well being of the home. This can work wonders for building self esteem.

Rules aren't for fools

Rules are essential in order to make children feel secure and for there to be some sort of order in the home. However, too many or too few rules interestingly create the same insecurities and fears within children. So find a balance. It helps if you can get your child's buy-in to the rules, such as “it's not nice to be hit by someone is it? So one rule we have in this house is no hitting.” Remember a few rules that are essential for the safety and well-being of your children, will be far better than a long list of draconian rules which inevitably will either crush your child's spirit or cause him in later years to rebel.

Spend time together as a family and decide on your rules. And remember there is a difference between preferences and rules. A rule is a non negotiable decision in the family. A preference usually pertains to only one person's requirements. When you negotiate your rules, make sure that you are clear on the difference. “I would prefer you to dress as I want,” is a preference and different from a rule which may be “dirty clothes get put in the wash basket.”

Make sure the rules you decide upon can be enforced. Do they respect the property and rights of other family members? Do they help protect the child? Remember sometimes smaller children may need to be reminded of the rule, as in the excitement of the moment they may have forgotten. A simple reminder such as “not touching mummy’s computer,” or “loving kitty gently,” will remind the child.

Write down 6 rules for you family which you can agree on. Explain why they are there and the consequences of transgressing the rules. Rather have a few no-go rules than many that you forget and can’t adhere to.

.....Family Rules 1) 2) 3 4) 5) 6)
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Consistency is the Key

If one day a child is punished for transgressing a rule but gets off scott free the next day, if one child is punished while a sibling is not, or one parent enforces the rule, while another avoids doing so, it creates inconsistency, which is going to confuse a child, especially a toddler who is only just beginning to understand the concept of do’s and don’ts.

Agree when you make the rules on consequences for breaking them. This can also be an area where inconsistency occurs, with one transgression getting punished far more

severely one day than on the next. With mutual prior agreement on consequences, children will not feel they are being unfairly treated.

It is preferential if both parents are involved in the making and consequences of breaking rules, as often one parent will be less keen to discipline than another, meaning one parent starts feeling resentful for always having to be the wicked witch, while the other remains “the good guy.”

What can you do now to help?

List: **How you currently discipline:**

- Yell and scream?
- Ignore?
- Spank?
- Shame the child?
- Give Time out?
- Threaten but then don't act?
- Rule with a rod of iron so that the child is afraid?

Then write down how you believe you could improve on this, such as “Enforce rules calmly.”

Now being aware of how you discipline and having decided how you might like to change, monitor the difference during the week ahead.

Goal: Enforced rules calmly:

Result: Mon.....Tue.....Wed.....Thurs... Fri... Sat.... Sun. (suggest chart her)

If you do find yourself slipping back into your old patterns, just be aware that that is what is happening and know that you will find it easier the more conscious you are of what you are doing.

Simple steps can make the home environment a happier place and your child better behaved. Prevention as they say is better than cure!

Ann Gadd is author a number of books including *The A-Z of Common Habits*, Findhorn Press 2007, UK.