

Why Do My Kids Misbehave to Get My Attention? [Video Transcript]

Lynne: Hi, I'm Lynne Jackson, co-founder at Connected Families, and this is Chad Hayenga, one of our Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, and we're here today to have a conversation about why kids misbehave and specifically what's going on when they are just demanding our attention, and what we can learn from that. So Chad, what are your thoughts about why kids misbehave and why they demand our attention?

Chad: Well usually behavior has a purpose, and that purpose comes out in lots of different ways. Our belief system is what drives our behaviors, and our kids early on are trying to figure out what their belief system looks like. They're viewing the world around them and they're trying to understand it and get a better sense of that. Misbehavior often times comes from a belief system that isn't quite on the right track yet.

Lynne: And so what might a child that is demanding attention be believing? I mean, he's getting negative attention usually for it, so why would a child do that?

Chad: Usually the belief around a child that's misbehavior to get undue or negative attention is the sense that "the only way I'm significant or belong is if everybody's focused on me." If the world is revolving around me, if the spotlight's on me, then I'm okay.

Lynne: Okay, so that's why a child can be playing nicely and as soon as the phone rings it's like "Oh, now I'm aware that the attention is not on me," and that creates an anxiety. So now I'm going to run over to you, Chad, and pull on your pant leg -- "Daddy, daddy, daddy!" -- and drive you nuts.

Chad: Absolutely. And that's one of the things that parents will most often feel when their child is trying to get attention in negative ways -- they'll feel annoyed. It'll almost just be the sense of "You are driving me crazy!" Have you ever been there?

Lynne: Oh, yeah! So this is an important thing to look at too -- it's like, what are the parents' beliefs that are driving that "crazy" feeling in their heads, that annoyance. And it's a belief that "My child should not be doing that right now!" and somehow, I may even be a bad parent because they're doing that. So if we take a step back as parents and look under the surface and go, "Okay, my child thinks I'm really important. They love me. They want my attention. That's a good thing." And then say, "Lord, what's the opportunity here to help my child grow in the way of asking for attention in a better way?" Have you had some experiences with that in your family?

Chad: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of the things that our kids learned early was that if they were to do something overtly disobedient they would get our attention! Undivided attention, even. And with lots of energy, right? We would just give them all this energy for this misbehavior. And so we worked at helping our kids have a language for what they needed. So they could actually say, "Dad, I need attention." And this is something that we're teaching our four, five, six year old kids -- to ask for what they needed. And they were even able to identify that sometimes they would do things

that weren't so good and they would get this attention, but they could just ask for it and we would give it to them. This happened to me. Three times my daughter came up to me and said, "Daddy, I need your attention. Daddy, I need your attention. Daddy, I need your attention." And the last time she said, "Daddy, I need your attention, and if I don't get it I'm going to have to go do something bad." And I went -- "Ohhhhhhh!"

Lynne: So that was awesome! She was learning to articulate her needs in a good way to get that met, which is a great skill for an adult relationship. Yeah, we did the same thing with Daniel. I remember him saying, "I need some attention right now!" What a helpful skill. So let's just close with some practical applications here. Number one would be for parents to take a look under the surface to see what's going on with them, and how can they "be okay" even when their child is not, how can they look at this as an opportunity. What's another practical application?

Chad: Well, I think being able to have your child have an expectation that you don't give attention on demand. So because my child is demanding my attention, it's probably something I want to pay attention to and say, "Well, how about if you set the timer for two minutes, and when the two minutes is up then you can ask for my attention respectfully and I would be happy to give it to you! You'll do great." Now we're teaching our child a skill.

Lynne: So when they come and they ask respectfully for attention you can give it immediately, and if they're demanding and doing something that is not a helpful behavior then you can also teach them delay of gratification and wait for that attention.

Chad: Absolutely, sure.

Lynne: Another thing we've found is helpful with our kids who loved attention was to give it to them in really big ways when they were just doing nothing in particular. Jim would have this thing of just going up to a child and saying, "I feel so strongly about you!" which was just totally goofy and dumb. But it gave them this big download of wonderful, happy attention. And then we were able to talk about the different feelings we had of when we receive happy attention or unhappy attention. And given the opportunity for happy attention, kids will pick that one pretty consistently. Any other thoughts about applications?

Chad: Well, I think the bottom line is understanding your child's belief system is in play, and anything you can do to encourage them to get what they need in helpful and respectful ways would be good stuff.

Lynne: Great. Thanks for joining us today.