

When Your Kid Acts Out, They're Actually Speaking Up

****All misbehavior = communication.**

If you grew up before positive parenting was widely recognized as a wise and effective approach to raising children, chances are your childhood was shaped by autocratic parenting. Your memories may be steeped in strict rules, rigidly enforced through high-demand tactics that left little room for questioning authority. If you did dare to pushback, there was often a steep price to pay.

Punishment, threats, yelling, and shame were handed out swiftly and without hesitation. The expectations were high—sometimes impossibly so—and compliance was non-negotiable. The underlying message was clear: “Do what you’re told, or else.” And so, you learned early on to fear mistakes. More than that, you learned to fear your parents.

It was considered smart parenting to make children afraid, as fear was believed to be the most effective tool for ensuring obedience. This was, in my opinion, the greatest misconception of past parenting systems—the falsehood that in order to make a child behave better, you must first make them feel worse.

If you were “good,” you were rewarded with praise, love, and attention. If you were “bad,” you were hurt—either physically through

corporal punishment (spankings, slaps, flicks, etc.) or emotionally through words laced with disappointment, judgment, and shame:

“What’s wrong with you?” “You should know better.” “I’m so disappointed in you.” “Why can’t you just be easier?”

For many parents today who find themselves knee-deep in reactive patterns, longing for a fresh start, this was their story. A cycle passed down, not out of malice, but out of unexamined tradition.

Stephen Covey, one of the most influential voices in leadership and personal development and author of the best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, understood this cycle well. His work has transformed millions of lives around the world, helping people break free from unconscious patterns and create lasting change. In his profound wisdom, Covey writes: “We see the world, not as it is, but as we are. . . or, as we are conditioned to see it. When we open our mouths to describe what we see, we in effect describe ourselves, our perceptions, our paradigms.”¹

When the first two decades of your life were shaped by external control methods, steeped in fear and force, of course it makes sense that you will walk into parenthood yourself believing that autocratic, reactive parenting is *the* way.

On the other side of the spectrum were homes where parents leaned toward permissive parenting. Boundaries were scarce, follow-through was inconsistent, and avoiding conflict often took precedence over setting clear expectations. In these homes, children ended up feeling lost, floating around without understanding where the limits were.

Growing up without clear fences might feel “kinda cool” at first, having parents who let you do whatever you want. But deep down, children from permissive homes don’t feel safe or supported. Without

boundaries and structure, they often feel unsure of themselves and unsure of whether or not their parents truly care.

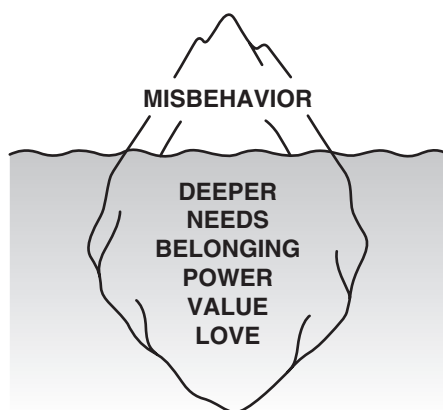
In decades past, parenting education was not culturally normalized, and family coaching wasn't readily available, so previous generations simply scrambled to figure it out, mostly falling into one of these two extremes:

- **Autocratic Parenting:** “My way or the highway” and “Because I said so.” Strict rules, high expectations of perfect compliance or “instant obedience with a happy heart” and harsh consequences for stepping out of line.
- **Permissive Parenting:** “Kids rule the roost.” Limits were loosely set or inconsistently upheld, with parents often giving in to avoiding confrontation and drama.

The truth is, both extremes leave children lacking in fundamental ways. Whether raised with autocratic parenting or permissive parenting, kids are left emotionally empty when core needs aren't met.

Renowned mid-century child psychologist Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, a student of Alfred Adler (the influential Austrian psychiatrist who developed Individual Psychology), revolutionized our understanding of child behavior with decades of research into human motivation. His work laid the foundation for modern positive parenting approaches by identifying that all behavior serves a purpose and is driven by basic human needs. Dr. Dreikurs identified four key needs that drive human behavior:

- The need to feel powerful
- The need to belong
- The need to feel valuable
- The need to be unconditionally loved



We'll talk more about deep needs in the next chapter, but here's what you need to know for now. If you grew up in an autocratic home, your mistakes weren't seen as opportunities for learning and growth. Instead, they were evidence of disobedience, selfishness, or failure—both on your part and your parents. The unspoken paradigm was:

"A misbehaving child = a bad child = a failing parent."

So when you pushed back, made a mistake, or strayed from expectations, the reaction was often immediate and intense. Threats and punishment became the tool for control.

Fueled by the fear of judgment—from society, family, or even their own inner critic—your parents reacted with yelling, threats, or a tone thick with anger or disappointment. The pressure was meant to intimidate or guilt you into compliance. Pain, shame, humiliation, or withdrawal of love were often used as tools of correction, because misbehavior felt like an emergency that needed to be fixed immediately.

But here's what we now know: Fear-based tactics don't cultivate long-term respect, trust, or true leadership. They create disconnection,

resentment, and cycles of shame. And if you are here reading this, then you already feel deep in your bones that there *is* a better way.

Judgment Not Needed ... Only Compassion and Courage

If there's one thing we must resist, it's the temptation to sit in judgment of those who came before us. Blame is easy. Compassion is braver.

As Maya Angelou, one of the greatest thought leaders and poets of the 20th century, so beautifully reminds us, "Do the best you can, until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."² Our parents—our grandparents, and all those before them—most of them were doing the best they could with the tools they had. Many of them raised children in a world where psychology wasn't accessible, where compassionate leadership was not the norm, and where trusted parenting educators didn't exist at the tip of their fingertips. "Their best" didn't mean they were fully equipped, but it did mean they were trying, just like we are now.

If they had known another way—if they had truly understood that love and leadership are never at odds, that firm boundaries don't require force, and that true respect cannot be demanded but only cultivated—maybe they would have chosen differently. But the grand majority didn't have the privilege of knowing. And we must hold that truth with tenderness.

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The truth is, they inherited something too.

For generations upon generations, leadership—whether in homes, churches, or entire civilizations—was built upon external control. Fear, force, intimidation, and manipulation were not only the norm but often celebrated as “good discipline” and “strong leadership.” The nervous systems of entire generations absorbed these patterns like oxygen, believing that overpowering another human being was the only way to influence them.

Plus, we must keep in mind that ancestral trauma runs deep. Wars, famine, economic collapse, segregation, authoritarian leadership systems, and systemic oppression left significant marks on nervous systems, which hardened hearts and taught people that survival often meant control. Keeping children in check through swift, forceful measures wasn’t questioned—it was a necessity for some, a conditioned response for others.

But now, we stand at a turning point.

We have knowledge. We have science. We have stories, research, and lived experience that show us a different way. A better way. A way of raising human souls with connection, compassion, and firm kindness—one that transforms homes, heals and upgrades legacies, and ripples out into the world far beyond our own families.

We cannot rewrite the past, but we can choose how we move forward. We can choose to soften the hardened places in our own hearts. We can choose to raise our kids with courage instead of control. We can choose to stand in the gap between what was and what will be, deciding that in this generation, we break cycles and build anew. We believe deeply in fresh starts.

Because healing. . . true healing—is not just for us.

It is for the generations of the past and the ones that follow. It is for the world we are shaping. It is for every child who deserves to grow up in a home where respect flows in all directions, where leadership is rooted in love, where safety is abundant, and where connection is not a reward but a birthright.

As Dr. Becky Kennedy, clinical psychologist, mom of three, and author of *Good Inside*, reminds us, *“When we show up as the parent we wish we had, we change our child’s world—and ours.”*³

Starting with ourselves and doing the work—with grace, compassion, and tenacity—is one of the greatest acts of service we can offer to the next generation. So we release judgment. We embrace and invite understanding. And with hearts full of grace and minds full of intention, we step forward to carry out and receive the healing that is ours to claim.

This is the work. And you are ready.

The Paradigm Shift

As published authors, researchers, doctors, and social scientists began sharing their findings, a profound shift started to take place in our world. Parents were finally given access to accurate, science-backed explanations for why children misbehave—moving away from the long-held belief that kids act out because they are inherently selfish, defiant, sinful, or bad.

Slowly but surely, families began embracing a new way of parenting, one rooted in connection over correction—a paradigm shift that led to remarkable success in raising children with respect,

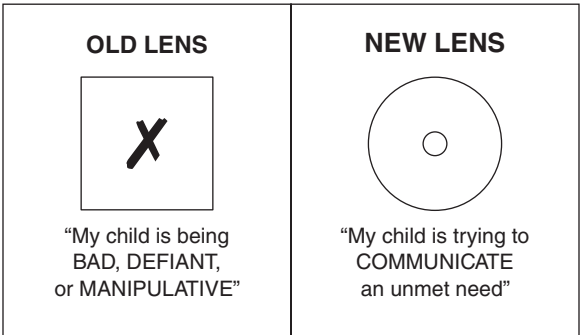
emotional literacy, and cooperation. Rather than seeing misbehavior as something to punish, parents began to understand it as a form of communication, an opportunity to teach and guide with both firmness and kindness.

Instead of:

“A misbehaving child = a bad child = a bad (or failing) parent. . .”

A more accurate, empowering paradigm and perspective took root:

“A misbehaving child = a communicating child = a capable parent who can guide, teach, and redirect with connection, dignity, and firm, kind leadership.”



Same behavior. Different understanding. Everything changes.

Then came the Digital Age of Information. . . the rise of the internet, the smartphone, and instant access to education. With it, the reach of this new way of parenting expanded exponentially. Parents around the globe began sharing their stories of transformation, proving that raising children with connection, guidance, and respectful discipline wasn’t just an idealistic dream—it was practical, effective,

and deeply life-changing (not just for individual families but also the world).

Which brings us to today. . . a time when books like this, along with countless research studies, blogs, social media resources, online courses, podcasts, and educational platforms, make this knowledge accessible to millions. The information is here. The tools are here. And the opportunity to rewrite family legacies has never been more possible. Hallelujah!

Day by day, we begin to see the world before us through a new lens, an updated paradigm that gives us true power to lead with integrity instead of dominate through control and outdated methods.

But What If . . . (Things Get Messy)

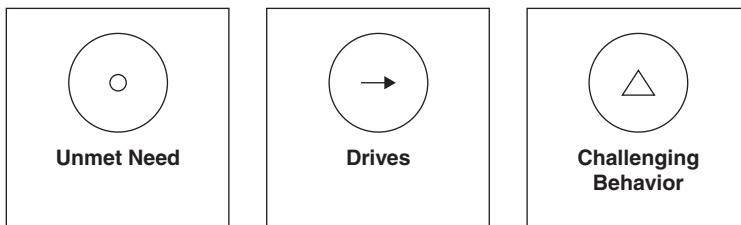
“What happens when my 4-year-old is screaming at the grocery store and everyone is staring? Am I really supposed to think ‘oh, she’s just communicating’ while she’s throwing cereal boxes?”

Here’s the truth: your nervous system is going to resist this new way of seeing. When your child melts down in public, that old programming will kick in like a fire alarm: “Everyone thinks you’re a bad parent! Do something! Make them stop!” Your body will flood with the same shame and panic your own parents felt, and every fiber of your being will want to revert to what feels familiar.

But seeing misbehavior as communication doesn’t mean you become a doormat. It doesn’t mean you don’t set limits or that consequences disappear. It means you respond to the message behind the behavior instead of just reacting to the behavior itself. When your daughter throws cereal boxes, the communication might be “I’m overwhelmed and I need connection” or “I feel powerless and I’m trying to get some control back.” Addressing that need—with empathy AND a clear boundary—is infinitely more effective than shame or threats.

The shift takes time and practice. You'll have moments where you forget and slip back into old patterns. That's not failure, that's human. What matters is that you keep coming back to curiosity instead of condemnation. Keep asking "what is my child trying to tell me?" instead of "how do I make this stop?" Because every time you choose to see your child as communicating rather than manipulating, you're rewiring not just their nervous system, but yours too. And that's how generational healing happens—one messy, beautiful moment at a time.

UNMET NEED = MISBEHAVIOR



It's not personal. It's not defiance. It's communication.
NEEDS: Power, Belonging, Value, Love

Journal Prompts for Reflection and Integration

Take some quiet time with these prompts. There's no rush, no perfect answers. . . just honest exploration of your heart and story.

- **Reflect on your childhood patterns:** What messages did you receive about misbehavior when you were a child? How do those beliefs show up in your parenting today?
- **Explore your triggers:** What specific behaviors from your children cause you to feel most overwhelmed, ashamed, or out of control? What might those moments be trying to teach you?

- **Look for unmet needs:** Choose one recurring behavior issue with your child. What need might they be trying to communicate? (power, belonging, value, unconditional love)

Actionable “How To” Steps (Because You’ve Got This!)

- **Slow down:** When misbehavior happens, pause and ask: “What is my child trying to communicate?”
- **Bring awareness to old paradigms:** Next time your child misbehaves, notice if you’re operating from the old belief that “misbehavior = bad child = bad parent.” Instead, practice the new paradigm:
“misbehavior = communication = empowered parent who can connect and guide.”
- **Get curious about the need:** When frustration rises, pause and ask which of the four needs your child might be seeking (power, belonging, value, or love).

