Dealing with Problem Behavior

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To make the punishment fit the crime,
The punishment fit the crime.
—Gilbert and Sullivan, The Mikado

No one is perfect. During your childhood, chances are you told a story that wasn’t true or helped yourself to something that wasn’t yours or used language that made your parents’ hair stand on end. Yet, you probably turned out OK. Most children do.

Sometimes, though, lying and other misbehavior goes beyond the usual childhood mischief. When this happens, many parents are shocked. Like detectives, they sniff out the evidence. They put children through the third degree. They search for “a punishment to fit the crime.”

But this is not the best way to deal with problem behavior. Some of this behavior is just a normal part of growing up, and usually disappears as children learn what’s expected of them. They must be discouraged, but by overreacting you can make the problem worse. You may even create a problem where none exists.

It’s hard to be good. Children’s misbehavior may mean they are still learning the difference between right and wrong. It could mean they are testing limits or looking for ways to reach out to others.

On the other hand, misbehavior could be a sign that a child is having trouble. Consider, for example, these typical problems:

**Lying.** It’s often hard for young children to separate what’s “true” from what’s “pretend.” During the early years, it’s perfectly normal for children to tell tall tales.

**Stealing.** In the preschool years, it’s not unusual for children to walk off with things that aren’t theirs. They just don’t know any better. They see something, want it, and take it.

But by the age of 5 or 6 years, children usually have more self-control. Even then, lapses aren’t uncommon. The time for concern is when children steal often or develop a pattern of stealing.

**Aggressive behavior.** It’s not easy for young children to control their feelings. They tend to hit or punch when they’re upset, because they don’t know a better way to get what they want.

But most children slowly learn better ways to express angry feelings. If children continue to use their fists and feet as they get older, they may need special help.
It’s hard to list A, B, and C as the ways to deal with problem behavior. You can, however, follow these guidelines when your children’s behavior concerns you:

- Make sure a problem really exists.
- Let children know what the ground rules are.
- Look for the causes behind problem behaviors.
- Deal with the new causes.

Results will not always appear right away. They may even get worse before they get better. But by trying to get to the bottom of things, you can bring behavior under control before it gets out of control.

The real problem

All behavior has a purpose. If children can’t meet their needs in approved ways, they’ll try other ways to get what they want.

Search for the cause of a problem behavior by asking yourself what the child is getting from the behavior. Observe when and how often it occurs. Think carefully about what’s going on in your child’s life. And look for answers to questions such as:

- Do I expect too little or too much from my children?
- Do I let them know how much I love them?
- Do I take time to explain what I expect of them and why?
- Are my methods of discipline too harsh?
- Do my children feel free to express their feelings?

Here are some common reasons why children develop problem behaviors.

To get praise or attention. Robin feels neglected. She believes her parents don’t listen to her or notice her very much. She’s found that the only way she can get their attention is to have a temper tantrum.

To express anger. Randy thinks his parents like his older sister more than him. He resents this very much. So, whenever his mother or father praises Wendy, Randy swears. He knows that annoys them.

To live up to parents’ expectations. Nancy knows it’s very important to her parents that she do well in school. They were very upset when she got a C on her last test. On the next test, Nancy cheats by looking at the paper of the girl next to her.

To avoid punishment. Whenever George does anything wrong, his father sends him to his room for the rest of the day. When George accidentally broke his father’s bowling trophy he lied. “The cat knocked it over.”

To gain friendship. Betsy isn’t very sure of herself. She thinks other children will like her only if she gives them things. So she steals money from her mother’s purse to buy candy for the other children.

To follow parents’ example. Herbie’s parents fight a lot and they always spank Herbie when they are angry at him. Herbie too, goes to pick fights with the other children in the neighborhood. He also hits and kicks whenever he wants something.

Look at why children misbehave to help you deal with problem behavior. When you understand the cause of the behavior, it’s easier to work with the child to change the problem behavior.