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Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Understanding Your Grandchild's Behavior - Part 1¹

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Goal: To provide grandparents with information related to age-appropriate expectations of children.

Parenting is a challenge the first time around. Becoming a parent the second time can be a greater challenge. This is especially true if your new role is a direct result of a crisis situation. Grandchildren who have lived in an unstable family need a lot of tender loving care. They may experience feelings of anger, hurt, guilt, and loss. The way you deal with their feelings and guide their behavior will be crucial to how well they adjust to their new lifestyle.

Identifying Reasons for Misbehavior

All children show inappropriate behavior at times. They lack adult experiences and by nature are curious and impulsive. Children can find many ways to misbehave. Some

children throw temper tantrums, yell, and scream. Others may disobey rules or fight with siblings. During this new time, your grandchildren are more likely to misbehave. It is important to identify the reasons for their misbehavior. Knowing why your grandchildren misbehave can make a difficult situation easier to handle. This can lead to a more meaningful and positive relationship. The following are some reasons why children misbehave:

Q Negative Feelings - A child's behavior can be affected by the experiences he* has had in life. Children in a crisis situation may feel betrayed, confused, fearful, and rejected. Do you recognize any of these feelings in your grandchild?

<i>angry</i>	<i>distrustful</i>	<i>resentful</i>
<i>depressed</i>	<i>guilty</i>	<i>isolated</i>
<i>jealous</i>	<i>scared</i>	<i>hopeless</i>
<i>helpless</i>	<i>homesick</i>	<i>moody</i>
<i>disappointed</i>	<i>hurt</i>	<i>sad</i>

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Other factors can affect the way children behave. These factors are being sick and having side effects from medications. Another factor that affects behavior can be having a physical or mental disability. In addition, studies show a mother's substance abuse during pregnancy may affect a child's disposition later on in life.

Children who have been through traumatic events may express their feelings through inappropriate behaviors. They express them by hitting, biting, fighting, not following rules, and constant arguing. Children need a sensitive adult who can recognize their feelings. They need one who will listen and not judge whether their feelings are good or bad. They also need a caring adult who can teach them how to express their feelings in more appropriate ways.

Q **Basic Needs Not Met** - When children's basic needs for food, personal space, shelter, safety, clothing, sleep, and exercise are not met, it affects their well-being. The lack of basic needs results in the following:

Basic Need	Consequence
Hunger	If a child is hungry, he may become cranky, whiny, and unpleasant.
Lack of sleep	If a child is overly tired, he may become more easily frustrated and have a temper tantrum.
Lack of activity	If a child is bored, he may be more prone to get into mischief.
Lack of personal space	If a child does not have enough space to move and play, he may begin acting out and become disruptive.

Q **Social Development** - A great deal of how a child behaves is learned from observing and interacting with parents and peers. Social development can occur in the following ways:

- Modeling-

Children learn social skills and appropriate behaviors through imitation. They learn how to act by observing important people in their lives, both friends and adults. To teach your grandchild appropriate behavior, model the way you expect him to act. For example, in a conflict, instead of yelling, name calling, or possibly throwing things, calm yourself first, then take a deep breath. In a calm tone of voice, ask for more information about what is happening. Tell your grandchild how his behavior affects other people. Help him find another way to solve his problem. Violence is never a solution to solving conflict.



- Reinforcement - Behaviors are strengthened by the way others respond to them. Children tend to repeat behaviors that adults pay attention to. This is why it is important to recognize and praise positive behaviors and not attend to negative ones. What happens when a child is behaving as a parent would like? This behavior could be playing nicely with a friend or sharing his toys. Usually, the parent ignores the situation thinking, "I don't want to even look that way," for fear of spoiling the moment. Parents often

forget that giving a child a word of praise or a pat on the back is key to making the child repeat the behavior. A positive response encourages the child to continue this good behavior. This is called "catching a child doing something right" instead of catching him doing something wrong.

Q Traits - Children are unique. Some children are generally more cheerful, energetic, and upbeat. Others tend to be more easily angered, impulsive, or defiant. In addition, children can become moody and overly cautious in new situations. These are not learned behaviors but inborn traits called temperament. Research has found that most children exhibit one of three types of temperament:

- **Easy child:** follows rules most of the time, accepts change easily, and generally remains in a good mood
- **Slow to warm up:** negative in mood and adjusts slowly to new experiences
- **Difficult:** has many temper tantrums, gets overly excited, argues and does not adapt well to new situations

Which temperament best describes your grandchild? It is difficult to distinguish between learned behavior and inborn

temperament. You might think that learned behavior can be changed but inborn traits cannot. This is not true. Temperament can be changed through the parenting skills we use.



In summary, there are many factors that contribute to a child's misbehavior. Identifying the causes of misbehavior can help you guide your grandchild's behavior.

The following are some scenarios of misbehavior. Try to identify the misbehavior and the reasons.

1. Luis, age 3, has been shopping with you for the past four hours. When you tell him that there is one more store to go to, he throws a temper tantrum.

misbehavior _____
reason _____

2. Sarah and Susie start fighting soon after their mother, who was visiting for the day, leaves unexpectedly.

misbehavior _____
reason _____

3. Erica, age 8, has recently made friends with a group you don't approve of. One day she comes home from school yelling curse words you don't use at home.

misbehavior _____
reason _____

See page 4 for answers.

Ages and Stages of Your Grandchildren's Development

Understanding and guiding your grandchild's behavior will be easier if you consider the various ages and stages of his development.

Although you have raised your own children, it is easy to forget what children are like. Children face different challenges at every

stage of their growth. As their guardian, you need to be able to put yourself in their shoes. Keep in mind, many times a child's behavior is a characteristic of his stage of development. Following are some age-related characteristics:

Q **Infants:** birth to 12 months

- Require physical touch like cuddling, stroking, and rocking for physical and emotional growth
- Communicate through crying, smiling, cooing, and babbling
- Explore by putting objects in mouth
- Need stimulation through touch, sounds, and textures
- Soothe themselves by sucking hands and fingers.

Q **Toddlers:** 1 - 3 years old

- Like to explore and are very curious
- Seek independence
- Are impatient
- Do not understand sharing
- Have a hard time expressing their emotions and, therefore, have temper tantrums



Q **Preschoolers:** 3 - 5 years old

- Ask lots of questions
- Enjoy pretend games and have imaginary friends
- Are learning to be more cooperative with other children
- Have extreme mood changes
- Are proud of their ability to complete more tasks on their own

Q **School-age children:** 6 - 12 years old

- Begin to question rules of parents
- Enjoy being with their friends
- Have an increased interest in out-of-school activities
- Find it hard to deal with criticism and failure
- May like to tease and criticize each other



Q **Adolescents:** 12 - 18 years

- Are overly self-conscious
- Question authority of parents and adults, which creates conflict
- Are more idealistic and critical
- Experience hormonal and physical changes
- Experience increased peer pressure to conform

Answers to page 3:

1. Temper tantrum; basic needs not met - tired and hungry
2. Fighting; negative feelings - frustrated and hurt
3. Curse words; modeling

*This publication uses "he", "his", or "him" to represent children of both genders

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