

## **Why Kids Misbehave**

Living where the wild things are? Here's how to tame your brood

By Dr. Greg Cynaumon

My first five years of fatherhood were undeniably blessed. I had the sweetest, most well-behaved kids on the planet. This was especially true of my 5-year-old angel, Tracy (aka The Princess), who was every dad's dream. She was adorable, compliant, loved Sunday school, and seemed to exist just to adore me. I theorized that my superhero dad status must have been a byproduct of the three parenting books I'd written. Certainly my daughter was living, breathing testimony that a psychologist could indeed raise well-behaved kids.

On the rare occasion when she would misbehave (completely by accident, you understand, and undoubtedly influenced by her mother), all we needed to do was slightly lower the brow followed by an ever-so-subtle horizontal nod. She would freeze whatever it was she was doing, apologize, wax my car, and ask for forgiveness. (Actually, the wax-my-car part was just a fantasy as it would hugely violate child labor laws.)

When it came to the subject of misbehaving children and discipline, my secret theory was that the other 152.5 million parents on the planet were snivelers and whiners. How tough could this parenting thing be if all it takes is a stern look, and every kid within eyesight drops his fruit snack and stops whatever dastardly deed he's doing? My goodness, I could bottle this Stern Look Thing and retire at 40.

Oh how naïve.

That's when God decided he was going to humble me. I clearly fell from parenting grace through the birth and formative years of our second child. Many have known him by his various monikers such as Lucifer, Beelzebub, and the Great Deceiver. In our household, he simply answered to the name Matt.

In the span of a few short months, Matt dismantled everything I had come to believe about the fine art of discipline. Spankings? He would receive a little swat on his behind and just stand there as if to say, "Is that all you got?" And timeouts? Ha! Timeouts were just opportunities for Matt to hone his parent-torturing skills in the privacy of his room. Matt's response to a 15-minute timeout seemed to be, "Fifteen minutes? I'm just warming up! Let's make it an even hour. And while we're at it, how about sending in the cat and the hedge trimmer ... it's mohawk time."

Okay, perhaps I'm guilty of exaggerating my son's misbehaving ways in order to illustrate my point, which is: You can't rely on the discipline skills you developed with one child and expect them to fit the other.

### **The DQ study**

My experiences with my kids and how they required such opposite disciplinary techniques led me on a new clinical journey. As a doctor, my clinical goal became

studying and understanding what drives kids to misbehave. In 1999 I commenced a study featuring 147 volunteer families. Each family agreed to let me and my team observe them closely over a 16-month period. The study produced four remarkable discoveries. They were:

**Discovery #1** Misbehaviors (things like forgetting chores, not getting dressed on time, bickering with a sibling, etc.) were not the main problem at all, but merely symptoms of the underlying reason for the misbehavior.

**Discovery #2** The emergence of three underlying motives which were found to drive 92% of all misbehaviors. They were:

(a) a child feeling insecure.

(b) a child feeling unimportant, discounted, or minimized. It didn't matter if it happened at home, in school, or with a group of friends.

(c) a child's desire for more (more toys, more play time, etc.) exceeding his ability to do the right thing.

**Discovery #3** Children ranging in age from 2 to 18 could be divided into four distinct discipline personality types, which we called the DQ Factor (discipline quotient). I call these types Bears, Monkeys, Porcupines, and Lambs. The DQ Factor actually predicted how, why, and when the child would misbehave.

**Discovery #4** Once the child's DQ Factor was identified, the parent could apply specific types of disciplinary techniques that were statistically proven to be most effective with that child's DQ Factor.

### **Motivations for misbehavior**

Without a doubt, the most problematic four-letter word for human beings is more. And when it comes to understanding discipline, you simply cannot discount the important role that "more" plays between you and your child.

If you tell a 6-year-old he can't have a cookie before dinner, and yet he sneaks one when you are out of the room, there's no question he has misbehaved. The question then becomes, why? Did he know he wasn't supposed to take a cookie? Of course. Was he capable of following the no-cookie rule? Again, the answer is yes. Did he know that getting caught would certainly bring about consequences? Hopefully, this answer is also yes. Therefore, you must conclude that he simply chose to disobey and challenge your authority by partaking of the forbidden cookie. Somewhere in his 6-year-old brain, he decided the joy (the "more" in this case) that a cookie creates was worth the risk of incurring your anger and any subsequent punishment.

All of us make poor choices on an hourly basis. If you stopped long enough to analyze the reason for these poor choices, you would find the desire for more was likely at the root of the choice. Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit. Why? Because they wanted more wisdom. It would allow them to be more like God. It remains the same today. We still want more. We mistakenly believe that attaining more of whatever it is will make us more significant, important, loved, and therefore happier.

This desire for more often serves as the motivation for misbehavior. But the key to effective discipline is to figure out what it is your child wants more of.

The DQ study led me to put kids into one of four personality types—Bears, Monkeys, Porcupines, and Lambs (see sidebar below). Once a parent knows how to identify each child's type, that parent is most of the way toward knowing why that child misbehaves and how to bring about better behavior.

WHETHER YOU HAVE a Bear, Monkey, Porcupine, or Lamb in your habitat, your goal cannot change—to be the best parent you can be, trusting that God knew what he was doing when he gave you your children.

## **Monkeys & Lambs & Bears, Oh My!**

Knowing your child's "species" will help you determine your plan of discipline.

The DQ study yielded four personality types — Bears, Monkeys, Porcupines, and Lambs. To determine your child's type, read the descriptions at right. In addition, think about how your child makes you feel when he or she misbehaves. Typically:

- ❖ parents of **Bears** feel threatened, challenged, and angry.
- ❖ parents of **Monkeys** feel irritated, annoyed, and controlled.
- ❖ parents of **Porcupines** feel hurt, manipulated, minimized.
- ❖ parents of **Lambs** feel inadequate, pity, frustrated.

Once you have a good idea of your child's personality type, you'll better understand why she misbehaves—and you'll have some strategies for dealing with that misbehavior.

### **Bears**

*Description:* Strong-willed child. Will often misbehave in challenging, controlling, confrontive ways and often just for the sake of misbehaving. Often complains about the rules and how unfair they are. Outwardly despises discipline and being told what to do. Will also routinely challenge your authority in an attempt to gain the upper hand and take control.

*Motivation:* Children identified as "Bears" crave control. They feel most significant (most important in everyone's eyes and their own) when they are in control. Therefore, when your Bear misbehaves, he is likely doing so in an attempt to gain control, thereby increasing his self-esteem. Even if he doesn't succeed in gaining self-control, the matter itself was enough to give him a sense of self-satisfaction, power, and control. At the very least, you were drawn into battle, which in his mind means he is powerful and influential—even over you.

*Discipline Strategy:* As the grown-up, you are responsible to change the atmosphere. Learning to compromise and work toward mutual respect, cooperation, and shared decision-making will help change your Bear's attitude, especially in the area of cooperation.

*What Works:* Ignoring (Bears feed off knowing they can control your reaction), timeouts (Bears like to be noticed, so being out of the center of activity hurts), and taking away privileges (Bears don't like it when they can't do what they want).

### **Monkeys**

*Description:* Not as strong-willed, controlling, or combative as his Bear cousin. Seems to misbehave in odd and obvious ways, knowing he will get caught and get into trouble. Misbehavior is often motivated by his need for attention from you and other authority figures.

*Motivation:* Monkeys crave attention. Their life ambition is to attain significance by being noticed. They live to capture your attention and will stop at nothing to get it. They will be cute and cuddly as long as cute and cuddly works. But once they sense C&C isn't cutting it, they will shift gears to whatever it takes, including misbehavior. Once they get your attention, they feel significant, important, and therefore loved.

*Discipline Strategy:* Having a win-at-all costs mentality to confronting discipline will blow up in your face with most people, but especially Monkeys. Instead, try reflective listening which slows conversation down and helps you really listen to your child.

*What Works:* Ignoring (Monkeys love attention, so not getting a reaction takes the fun out of misbehaving), timeouts (Monkeys are social, so they hate being away from people), and

natural consequences, such as flunking a test when he failed to study (Monkeys will avoid repeating a behavior when it results in something unpleasant).

### **Porcupines**

*Description:* Usually quiet and not nearly as in your face as the Bear or as obvious as the Monkey. Is passive-aggressive in that he says everything is okay, but underneath it all, he is ticked about something. If you hurt him emotionally, he will figure out a way to get you back. Often, that means misbehaving.

*Motivation:* Porcupines are searching for self-importance, significance, and self-worth. They will sometimes say and do angry, hurtful things in a miscalculated attempt to elevate their self-image. When a porcupine feels criticized, put down, or minimized, he will always pay you back. His delicate balance of self-worth cannot tolerate a direct hit, and he will respond by putting you down.

*Discipline Strategy:* Avoid being drawn into an angry exchange cycle of paying your child back for hurting you by saying something equally hurtful. Porcupines react to your angry reaction by feeling justified in seeking revenge. There is strength in being self-controlled, listening, responding, and then allowing your child to have the final word. So don't allow yourself or your child to stray from the point.

*What Works:* Verbal reprimands (Porcupines need to be reminded that their hurtful attitude is inappropriate), natural consequences (losing friends because she often hurts their feelings will impact a Porcupine on a deep level), and taking away privileges (Porcupines need to feel the sting of lost privileges to keep their revenge from paying off).

### **Lambs**

*Description:* Not at all strong-willed or motivated by revenge. Has poor self-esteem and is convinced he is inadequate and messes up everything; engages in a bit of "victim think." Will commonly misbehave to get you to take over and do things for him.

*Motivation:* Lambs tend to see themselves as weak, incapable, and destined to fail. Therefore, Lambs avoid demanding situations where their successes and failures can be seen. They accomplish this through a number of avoidance techniques, like appearing so helpless that you will do things for them.

*Discipline Strategy:* Because Lambs are insecure, they need lots of unconditional love. Hug your child and say "I love you" several times a day. Compliment your child and notice what is remarkable about him. Anytime you talk to your Lamb, focus your vocabulary on extremely complimentary words such as "remarkable," "impressive," "talented," and "special." (Naturally, these expressions of love will benefit all children, but they're especially important for Lambs.)

*What Works:* Ignoring (Lambs want you to feel sorry for them, so giving them sympathy will only increase the behavior), taking away privileges (Lambs need to know there are consequences for their misbehavior), and proximity timeouts. A proximity timeout involves isolating the child emotionally without creating physical distance. Put the timeout chair in the corner of a room where the child can sit facing the wall.