



Stop, Wait, Go

FACTSHEET

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The Four Main Purposes of Children's Misbehaviour

Rudolf Dreikurs, a world renowned psychiatrist and educator changed the way we think about children's misbehaviour and how we manage it. His explanation was that children's behaviours of attention seeking, power, revenge and withdrawal can be identified by our emotional reaction to that behaviour. This in turn can reinforce the behaviour, increasing the incidents, rather than changing the behaviour.

Attention Seeking: Gaining attention from our parents is normal human behaviour and ensures our survival. We get fed and loved and cared for. Needing to get attention by misbehaviour only, can be a sign that we are simply not meeting the child's needs and need to give the child more time – but this needs to be when they are behaving appropriately and considerately. When the behaviour is misbehaviour, it will cause you to feel **annoyed**. These may be interrupting, whining, nagging for things in the supermarket, niggling their brother. Not enough to make you angry, but certainly irritating.

When you respond with annoyance: you will be reinforcing the behaviour and it is likely that this will increase.

Stop and think: deal with the situation in a calm and rational way. What is the child needing, what is she trying to say? You may offer alternatives and deflect, give a choice for a better result. Give a direction and **walk away**. Resolve with a minimum of attention, but when you get appropriate behaviour, respond warmly. *"Great talking John, I really like it when you use your words."*

Power: If you are feeling threatened or angry by the child's behaviour, it is likely that the purpose is power. If you find that you immediately want to fight back and win you are heading towards a power struggle. If you invest in a power struggle it is likely to escalate the behaviour.

When you respond with anger, yelling, swearing, aggressive body language you will be likely to reinforce the behaviour until someone wins and someone has lost.

Stop and think: say *"I am too angry to talk right now, I need a little time out to think about it"*

When the parent/adult speaks respectfully, identifies the feelings of anger, models good anger management themselves, and comes up with some alternatives to solve the problem the solution will be productive. The child will learn how to solve problems, rather than create them.





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Revenge: this can follow when a child feels that they have lost in a power struggle or that their life is out of their control. Children do not have control of many aspects of their life and they may try to gain control of some things by unreasonable behaviour. The child may be blaming the adult for things not turning out the way that they wanted it to, even when the adult was not to blame.

When you respond with feelings of guilt, try to get even by offering hurtful replies, and feel hurt, you will be role modelling the inappropriate behaviour, reinforcing it and likely to get more of it.

Stop and think: this behaviour does not need punishing or hurtful responses but indicates that the child needs to be heard in order to be healed.

Acknowledge that the words were hurtful, say how you are feeling *“I feel really hurt when you speak to me like that”* Speak calmly and respectfully. Ask how they are feeling, what has happened. Stay quiet and let them think. The biggest mistake that parents make is too much talk and too much emotion

Withdrawal: This is the most serious behaviour, it indicates that the child has almost given up getting their needs met. They are discouraged, usually feel low self- esteem. This behaviour takes the longest to effect changes.

When you respond with expressions of inadequacy, expect that the child will fail, agree that the child is a failure, you will be reinforcing the child’s negative belief in themselves and their life.

Stop and think: how can we achieve successes with this child, what can I do to have fun with them, present things in small chunks, scaffold the ideas so that they get a positive result. *“I will do this bit while you fix that bit” “Great job” “You nearly got it” “Super effort”*

Catch them being good. Say what you saw and how it made you feel. *“I noticed that you cleaned up in the kitchen without being asked, wow that is so awesome. I am so proud of how grown up and responsible you are becoming”*

Once you have identified the goal of the behaviour by looking at your own emotional response, you will need to change your customary response and apply the **stop and think** techniques to bring about more positive behaviours. Don’t forget to give praise and encouragement when you are getting better behaviour.

