The 8 Goals of Adolescent Misbehavior*

As children mature they develop methods of achieving their basic goal: a sense of belonging. The family atmosphere, the child's position in the family (youngest, oldest, and so forth), the methods of child training parents use, and the child's creative response to the challenges of life all affect how a child behaves. These factors help shape a personality, and they have an impact on the ways an individual seeks a sense of belonging.

Children who misbehave usually do so for a purpose. The term misbehavior refers to actions and words that disregard or disrespect the rights or safety of others, or that are self-defeating or even dangerous to oneself. Misbehavior doesn’t foster a child’s development; in fact, it hinders development. If children are busy putting energy into getting power or revenge, for example, they're stopping themselves from pursuing positive goals.

There are eight identified goals of misbehavior:

- Excitement
- Comfort
- Escape
- Attention
- Helplessness
- Power
- Revenge
- Peer Acceptance

One or more of these goals represent methods that teens use to achieve a sense of belonging. When pursued in excess, or through irresponsible acts, they, too, are based on faulty beliefs and mistaken ideas - they're simply not in teens' best interests.

How do you recognize a goal of misbehavior? Your own feelings and your child's response to what you do or say are your best guide to understanding the purpose of your child's misbehavior. When your child misbehaves, consider first your own feelings. Are you annoyed? angry? hurt? depressed? Second, look at how your child responds when you react to his or her behavior. Does your child ignore you? scowl at you? argue? momentarily stop the misbehavior, or begin again? By first identifying how you feel, and, second, examining your child's reaction to your attempt at correction, you can identify what your child is after. And once you know your child's goal, you can learn how to deal with the misbehavior in the most effective way.

The first step, then, is to identify the goal of your child's misbehavior. As you'll see, each of the eight goals of teenage misbehavior is associated with a specific feeling or response of the parent and with some typical reactions of the child to the parent's attempt at correcting misbehavior. In counseling we'll deal with specific ways for parents to proceed after they've identified the goals of teenage misbehavior.

**Excitement.** When teens whose goal is excitement use negative behavior to pursue the goal, or seek their excitement to excess, their parents often find themselves on the defensive. The teen avoids routine, pursues adrenaline-laced activities, or seeks out stimulant drugs. Parents may spend half of their time reacting to exploits and the other half worrying about what's to come. They're usually shocked and surprised by their child's actions, and they often feel hurt and angry as well.

**Comfort.** The teen who is seeking to escape stress will do so through relaxing behaviors such as sleep, excessive use of technology, and even depressant drugs. Parents may worry, feel frustration with perceived laziness, attempt to motivate the teen, or limit use of technology.

*Modified from Dinkmeyer & McKay, Parenting Teenagers (STEP Program)
**Escape.** The teen that is pursuing escape is reacting to a world that is boring, stressful, or hurtful for them. They may spend hours playing fantasy games, daydreaming, get into excessive technology, or abuse hallucinogens. The parent may worry, feel excluded, or attempt to limit the escaping behavior.

**Attention.** Almost all young children seek attention, and the goal appears in teens to varying degrees. If children can't get attention in positive ways, they may seek it in ways that are disturbing and annoying. Like the rest of us, teens want to be noticed! They may try to be noticed by turning up the volume of the television or stereo, or by interrupting conversations. If you're having a conversation with a friend of yours and your daughter suddenly turns on the stereo loudly in the next room, ask yourself how you feel. If you feel annoyed, the chances are good that your daughter's goal is attention.

**Helplessness.** Teens who display inadequacy are the most discouraged of all children. Their goal is to see that others expect nothing of them. They show parents (and themselves) that they just can't make friends, gain or lose weight, figure out homework assignments, or perform household tasks adequately. These teens believe they lack the ability and stamina to perform competently; they have a very low opinion of themselves. Some have the mistaken belief that anything less than the best is nothing. When they don't think they can be the best, they give up. Their parents generally feel despair and may also want to give up. They may actually come to agree that their child is incompetent and inadequate.

**Power.** Power-seeking teens believe they are important when they challenge authority and take control. Afraid that other people are out to boss them around, they look for ways to control every situation. Such teens may try to boss parents. Power-seeking teens want to do only what they decide to do. Often when parents challenge them, the parents may win the argument but lose ground in the relationship. Because power-seeking behavior is teens is associated with and anger response in parents. If your son takes off in the family car without asking, you may feel angry and want to fight back - perhaps yell and threaten. If you give in and allow him this freedom, he'll know who's in control. But if you decide to fight power with power, your child will probably be impressed with the usefulness of power and may intensify the struggle. When dealing with a power-seeking child, it is best to disengage from the struggle. Who can fight without an opponent? Once you've identified power as your child's goal, you'll be able to begin practicing new responses that will not satisfy that goal.

**Revenge.** Teens who pursue revenge are in reaction to wounds they’ve received. They believe they can resolve this wound by being cruel and hurting others. A child who has been involved in a power struggle with a parent and who knows the parent has won can still inflict hurt upon the parent. When faced with revenge-seeking behavior, parents usually feel deeply hurt. They may want to get even. But by punishing their child, these parents provide a fresh reason for the teen to seek further revenge.

**Peer acceptance.** Teens who seek to be accepted by their peers will get along fine with their parents as long as everyone agrees on the choice of friends. If, however, parents don't approve of their children's friends, they'll feel anxious and worried. One of the dangers is that poor selection of peers translates into negative behaviors. Parents may worry and try to get the teen to be with different friends.

Notice that several goals can be pursued at the same time with a single behavior. The self-destructive use of cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs provides not only excitement and peer acceptance, but also a means to seek revenge and exercise power over a parent's attempts to control the child's activities. The same could be true of a teen who regularly watches gory
movies or spends lots of time with videogames. A child who chooses friends that parents dislike may actually be using peer acceptance to gain parental attention or display power. Engaging in sex could be for the purposes of excitement and power in an area outside of the parent's control, or it could be to gain a partner's acceptance. When a child is using drugs as an escape, he or she may appear to be seeking excitement but actually be displaying inadequacy to meet the challenges of living.

Teens are usually not aware of their goals, except when the goal is revenge. But even when revenge is a goal, teens are not aware that they have decided the only way to deal with feeling hurt is to hurt back.

Teens can change goals, use different behavior for the same goals, or use the same behavior for different goals. The only way for parents to determine the goal is by identifying their own feelings and the child's reactions to their attempts to correct the misbehavior.

It's important for you to gain an understanding of all eight goals. Why? Because they occur in relationship with your child. By changing your responses to these goals, you can influence your child's behaviors.

As you ponder these eight goals of misbehavior, remember that they are found in all children and adults in varying degrees. If you were to analyze your feelings, words, and actions over the course of a week's time, you'd probably find evidence of all eight. Nobody's perfect! The point of exploring these goals so carefully is not to prove how "bad" teens are. The point is to understand both their misbehavior and parents' reactions to it. Only by doing this can ineffective patterns of behavior be broken and new, effective parent-child relationships built.

Positive Goals
When we say that teens’ behaviors have certain goals, we mean that everything they do has a purpose. A goal is the end toward which all behavior is directed. Just as our destination on a car trip influences our choice of routes, so too does a goal influence behavior. And just as we're able to choose a destination, we are able to choose goals for ourselves as well. Human beings have the ability both to understand and to choose the ways they behave.

Along with goals of misbehavior, there are also positive goals that teens (and the rest of us) pursue. As we mentioned, some goals are negative only when they're pursued excessively or at the expense of one's own or another person's well-being. Obviously excitement, comfort, escape, attention, power and peer acceptance can be positive goals. They can nurture self-esteem while influencing behavior that is socially responsible and personally satisfying. A goal is positive if it fosters self-respect, respect for others, shared responsibility, and cooperation for constructive ends.

Teens, like all people, pursue a combination of positive and negative goals. Parents have a responsibility to encourage in their teens behavior that reflects positive goals. Encouraging cooperation is crucial. By cooperation we mean the willingness to participate in the give-and-take of human relationships - to be as concerned about other people's welfare as one's own. Encouragement increases children's self-esteem and feelings of worth. As these feelings take root and grow, teens naturally become interested in cooperating with their parents and other people. With their parents' help they begin to take responsibility for their own behavior, make decisions wisely, and accept the consequences of their own decisions.

We're not talking magic here - just basic psychology. Teens who act irresponsibly are out to justify their misbehavior - they're afraid to criticize themselves. Healthy teens are more likely to evaluate their behavior and to modify it where it seems to be mistaken. They see the value of
cooperating. When teens discover they can gain a sense of belonging through positive behavior, they are less likely to misbehave. They usually won't crave attention because they'll feel assured that their positive actions will be noticed. Children who learn they can be effective through resourceful and responsible action won't feel a need to enter into power struggles with their parents. And as children learn to feel good about themselves, they'll tend to become more respectful of others, including their parents.

Responding to Misbehavior
Misbehaving teens generally do not give up their negative goals and behavior overnight. It takes time and effort on parents' part. Keep in mind that parents can't make teens change; parents can change only themselves and their own behavior. In fact, when parents begin responding differently, teens often increase the amount or intensity of misbehavior. But if parents change, their children will learn in time that old ways and old patterns of behavior simply don't work. It's at that point that teens have an incentive to change. If parents continue to respond to misbehavior in the same old ways, there is no incentive.

The best way to deal with negative, aggressive, or apathetic behavior is to decide how your child wants you to respond and then avoid that response. Break the pattern!

If your fourteen-year-old daughter likes to annoy you by coming to the dinner table dressed up like her favorite rock idol, ignore the clothing and have a discussion about other things that interest her. If you become annoyed, she'll only continue her attention-getting behavior.

The general guideline for responding to attention seeking is to never give attention on demand—not even for useful behavior. Parents can instead help teens become self-motivated by giving attention when it is not expected; they can catch them being "good."

The major problem most parents have with children is over the issue of power. Parents need to recognize that power struggles are counterproductive because they usually stimulate more teenage rebellion and more parental anger. Remember, too, that teens can fight back with apathy as well as open defiance. When you've got a hoarse voice from giving your child "marching orders," you know you haven't won a struggle.

We suggest that parents bow out of power struggles. Let teens experience the consequences of their misbehavior. Win their cooperation by enlisting their help, opinions, and suggestions. By abdicating the throne and resigning as decision maker, parents stop giving their children an authority figure worth rebelling against. By not expressing their anger in shouting matches, parents take the wind out of their teens’ "sails." If there's no wind (anger), teens can't go anywhere. They're stuck until they discover a new, effective way to get going.

The hurt and anger parents experience when their teens seek revenge can be difficult to overcome. Keep in mind that teens who seek revenge want to know they've hurt their parents. In these situations parents need to consciously avoid feeling hurt. Instead of seeking revenge in turn, parents can work to build a relationship based on trust. Kindness and patience will go a long way toward helping teens shed the desire for revenge.

Giving up on teens who display inadequacy will only allow them to become more discouraged. Showing them pity or disdain will increase their feelings of hopelessness. Encouragement is especially important in dealing with these teens. We suggest that parents stop criticizing completely and encourage any positive efforts their children make. Discouraged children need to know they can succeed and belong and that they don't have to be perfect. It's not appropriate for parents to tell a child what they think the child's goal is. This is usually seen as being judgmental.
## The Goals of Adolescent Misbehavior*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>PAYOFF</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>PARENT’S FEELINGS AND REACTIONS</th>
<th>TEEN’S RESPONSE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Adrenaline and dopamine rush</td>
<td>Avoiding routine, stimulant drugs, sex, exciting activities</td>
<td>Nervous, angry, hurt. What will happen next? Is on guard.</td>
<td>Resists or continues exciting misbehavior</td>
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<td>Comfort</td>
<td>Relief from stress, endorphins, oxytocin, and vasopressin</td>
<td>Sleeping, cutting, depressant drugs, masturbation, excessive technology</td>
<td>Worry, frustration with perceived laziness, attempt to motivate, limit technology use</td>
<td>Resists or continues comforting behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>Altered state, endorphins, dopamine and norepinephrine</td>
<td>Hallucinogens, fantasy games, excessive use of recreational technology</td>
<td>Worry, feeling excluded, attempt to limit technology use</td>
<td>Resists or continues escape behaviors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>Having others paying attention.</td>
<td>Active: Clowning, mischief, unique dress</td>
<td>Annoyed</td>
<td>Temporarily stops behavior. Later repeats or does something else to attract attention.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Passive: Forgetting, neglecting chores</td>
<td>Remind, coax.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Feeling in control superior to others</td>
<td>Active: Aggressiveness, defiance, disobedience</td>
<td>Angry, provoked</td>
<td>If parent fights, teen intensifies or submits with defiant compliance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passive: Stubbornness, resistance</td>
<td>Fight power with power or give in.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Give in to sense of inferiority, no expectations from others</td>
<td>Quitting easily, avoid trying. Being truant or dropping out of school.</td>
<td>Despairing, hopeless, discouraged, give up</td>
<td>Continues in self-defeating or inept behaviors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>Getting back at others for perceived hurts</td>
<td>Active: Hurtfulness, rudeness, violence</td>
<td>Deeply hurt.</td>
<td>Seeks further revenge by intensifying attack or choosing another weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passive: Passive-aggressive behaviors.</td>
<td>Retaliate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer acceptance</td>
<td>A sense of belonging</td>
<td>Constantly attempting to obtain widespread peer acceptance.</td>
<td>Approval (if parent agrees with choice of friends). Worried, anxious (disapproves). Try to get teen to seek new friends.</td>
<td>Resists or continues to see friends. (May become power contest.)</td>
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*Significantly modified from Dinkmeyer & McKay, *Parenting Teenagers* (STEP Program)