



WWW.MEGHANBUTLEROT.COM | 082 446 9440 | MLBUTLEROT@GMAIL.COM

# KIDS & WORRISOME BEHAVIOURS

## THE NORMAL; THE ABNORMAL AND HOW TO HELP AND WHEN TO SEEK HELP!

Children are supposed to break the rules sometimes. Testing limits is how they learn about themselves and the world around them.

The expression "acting out" is however a different term that usually refers to problem-behaviour that is physically aggressive, destructive, verbally aggressive, or otherwise more severe than simple misbehaviour. Acting out is ultimately an extreme behavioural expression of emotions that relieves tension or communicates these big and often unpleasant emotions in a disguised or indirect way.

Other words parents or teacher may use to describe the behaviour associated with "acting out" include:

- **Aggression:** Hostile or violent words or actions directed at another individual.
- **Defiance:** Openly resisting or disobeying authority figures.
- **Disruptive behaviour:** Uncooperative or hostile behaviours that disrupt others.
- **Meltdowns:** An intense response to an overwhelming situation – usually related to the sensory system.
- **Oppositional behaviour:** Resisting direction or rules by being argumentative or refusing to cooperate.
- **Temper tantrum:** Emotional outburst that often involves crying and screaming to get what they want or when they do not get what they want.

# WHAT DOES NORMAL MISBEHAVIOUR LOOK LIKE?



One of our pre-schooler's main prerogatives are to seek independence! It is thus normal for them to argue and use their right to say "NO."

They commonly waver between demanding they are A BIG KID that can do everything by themselves and on their own, to using BABY TALK to state that they need assistance or support with a simple task.

Pre-schoolers may exhibit the occasional tantrum, but they should be gaining more control over their emotions and impulses compared to when they were toddlers. Any temper tantrums at this stage should be shorter and less intense than the toddler years.

Furthermore, children of ages 4 to 5-years may exhibit some minor aggression, but they should be learning how to use their words instead of violence.

Apart from this, sometimes worrisome behaviour occurs that is not so normal... These abnormal behaviours is often a sign of a different or more serious issue that needs attention.

## WHEN TO WORRY...

The following areas encompass WARNING SIGNS that may indicate more serious behaviour problems, especially when looking at what is developmentally appropriate:

- 1. Difficulty Managing Emotions:** Although it is normal for pre-schoolers to have occasional temper tantrums, they should be starting to cope with their feelings in a socially appropriate manner by Grade 00 and Grade R. If your child can't control their anger, frustration, or disappointment in an age-appropriate manner, there could be an underlying problem. These problems can range from trauma to sensory challenges which I will discuss later in this article.
- 2. Poor Impulse Control:** A pre-schooler's frontal lobe (the area in the brain responsible for reasoning, planning and impulse control) is still very much under-developed and develops slowly over time. Children who become aggressive or emotional quickly after for example losing a game or not getting their way, likely need help regulating their emotions and developing better communication skills (ways to express feelings of anger, frustration and irritation in a socially acceptable manner).
- 3. Failure to Respond to Discipline:** It's normal for children to push boundaries and repeat their mistakes from time to time to see if a parent will follow through with discipline. But it's not normal for a child to exhibit the same behaviour repeatedly if you're applying consistent discipline. If your child continues to exhibit the same misbehaviour regardless of the consequences, it could be a bigger problem (such as oppositional defiance disorder).
- 4. Struggles in School:** Behaviour that interferes with school is not something that should be ignored. This misbehaviour may indicate an underlying behaviour disorder (like ADHD or Autism) or a learning barrier/disability. Getting sent out of class, getting into fights on the playground, and difficulty staying on task are all potential warning signs.

5. **Trouble With Social Interactions:** When behaviour interferes with making friends and social interaction, this is also seen as a cause for concern. It's normal for kids to have spats with friends, but if your child's behaviour prevents them from having friends, that's a problem. Children should be able to develop and preserve healthy relationships with their friends.
6. **Sexualized Behaviour:** Sexualized behaviours that are not developmentally appropriate are a warning sign, often of exposure to trauma, sexual content or sexual abuse. It's normal for kids to be curious about the opposite sex and to want to know where babies come from. But sexualized behaviour should never be forced, at any age.
7. **Self-Injury:** Anytime anyone (adult or child) engages in self-injury, you need to pay attention. Banging their head, biting, pinching or cutting themselves are all behaviours that need to be evaluated by a Child Psychiatrist or Educational Psychologist. It's also important to have a child evaluated by a professional if there is any talk about suicide.

## HOW CAN YOU AS PARTENT OR TEACHER HELP A CHILD PRESENTING WITH MISBEHAVIOUR:



### STEP 1: GET TO THE CAUSE OF THIS BEHAVIOUR!

There are a number of likely reasons why children act out and not all of them are as simple as "they're just being bad."

When a child acts out, the pattern of unsuitable behaviour is often used to cover up deeper feelings of fear, anger, pain or loneliness or the behaviours are there because of underlying reasons that we miss if we do not have knowledge about them.

Responding negatively to a misbehaviour or just assuming the child is "just being bad," can leave the little one feeling even more alone with whatever emotions they are coping with and result in low self-esteem and self-worth issues.

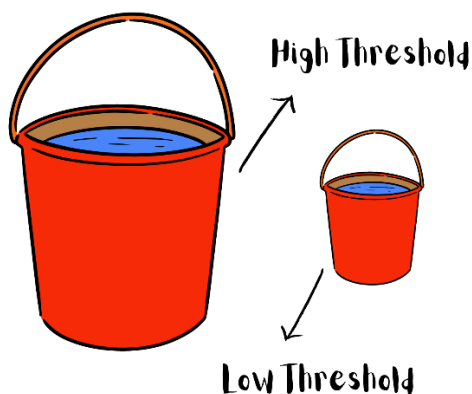
## LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT A COUPLE OF REASONS WHY A CHILD MIGHT ACT OUT...

1. **THEY ARE DEALING WITH AN UPSETTING SITUATION:** Some children act out because they are responding in a normal way to a situation that has upset them to the point where they are unable to manage their emotions. Sometimes, a child that acts out at school has been provoked into responding to other kids in the class. When they are disciplined for their actions while they were only responding to being teased or maltreated - the punishment, in a sense, teaches the little one that they do not have a right to be protected or have feelings – **This is the opposite of what we want and wish for our children when it comes to building their self-esteem.**

In other cases, a child may act out because of something that is happening outside of them - for example, a child who is being bullied at school may "act out" their anger and frustration by misbehaving at home, while a child that is the subject of a divorce might be "acting out" their feelings of confusion and insecurity by misbehaving at school. Even simple things such as parents fighting in front of a child (that does not have the ability to comprehend what is going on) may lead to unwanted feelings that are projected on the playground.

- 2. WANTING ATTENTION:** This has become very prevalent in today's day as parents work long hours and are often seen with a laptop or cell phone in hand. Children often "act out" as a means of getting attention from adults (and sadly they don't mind it being positive or negative attention). It helps to look your little one in the eyes when chatting and to make sure that you provide your undivided attention when spending time with them. Furthermore, you can use various parenting strategies for kids who often seek attention through negative behaviour. For instance, positive attention strategies may reduce bad behaviour. There are also some behaviours, such as power struggles, that are sometimes best left ignored.
- 3. STRUGGLING WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY:** Another cause for "acting out" may be frustration due to undiagnosed or untreated learning disabilities. A child who has, for example, undiagnosed ADHD or dyslexia will fall further and further behind in school. Eventually, if these challenges are not addressed, they will be unable to learn in a typical classroom setting. Unless changes are made, they have nothing to do except get into trouble. If you suspect that your child has a learning disability, talk to your child's teacher about your concerns. It also is helpful to discuss your child's struggles with an Occupational Therapist or Educational Psychologist.
- 4. COPING WITH SENSORY ISSUES:** This is a massive category on its own as problems with sensory integration are often the root of a little one not being able to regulate their emotions. Some children "act out" because of unrecognized sensory issues which easily goes unrecognized. For example, many children may have sensory challenges that make ordinary sights and sounds physically painful. Others are not getting enough sensory input which results in them biting, pushing and playing too rough with peers. **In sensory integration we use the example of a SENSORY BUCKET and SENSORY MODULATION that is explained as follows:**

Sensory Thresholds are sort of like Buckets...



If your bucket is **BIG**, you'll be able to handle lots of sensory input and you might even need extra in order to notice the input and feel alert/grounded

If your bucket is **SMALL**, you'll notice sensory input fast and only a little bit of input is needed to get you to that alert and grounded line. Too much easily leads to your bucket overflowing

Sensory modulation...

This is what we do to manage how full our sensory buckets are.



If we are well and feel safe, we usually do this without thinking (by either avoiding or seeking sensory input).

#### SEEKERS

You might rock on your chair, chew your pencil or move around a lot if you have a big bucket in certain areas of the sensory spectrum

#### AVOIDERS/SENSITIVE PEEPS

You might need space or peace and quiet, you avoid touching stuff and eating certain foods when you've had a rough day

Get in contact with an Occupational Therapist if you suspect your child has sensory issues. **On the next page, you will find a RED FLAGS checklist that will help you identify issues and developmental delays that may contribute to prevalence of misbehaviours. These flags all give you the go ahead to contact an OT in your area for further investigation.**



# Identifying the **RED FLAGS** in child development

A child develops as he/she gets older! Certain skills are needed in order for adequate concentration and school related skills to develop. This checklist was compiled to assist you with the spotting of red flags in development in order to help you help your little one reach their full potential.

## GROSS MOTOR INDICATORS

- Struggles to maintain a good sitting/ standing posture.
- Struggles to sit still.
- Struggles with ball skills.
- Does not know own body (where what is and man drawing).
- Afraid of heights.
- Struggles with activities that require balance.
- Shifts/turns body/page when working at table.
- W or M sits on carpet/floor.
- Struggles to master galloping and skipping.
- Struggles to balance or hop on one leg.
- Falls regularly and gets hurt often.

## FINE MOTOR INDICATORS

- Poor pencil grip and use of utensils.
- Hand tires easily during colouring/ writing.
- Swops hands.
- Poor quality when writing/colouring/cutting.
- Struggles to tie shoelaces/zips/ buttons etc.
- Struggles to copy figures/pictures/ from board.

## SENSORY INDICATORS

### OVER SENSITIVE/AVOID BEHAVIOUR:

- Dislikes physical contact, hugs and kisses.
- Has a big personal space.
- Dislikes textures/some materials (sand/dough/clothing tags).
- Dislikes getting dirty.
- Dislikes walking barefoot.
- Avoids swings/slides/jungle gym.
- Gets carsick.
- Poor sleeping pattern and fussy eater.
- Dislikes getting dressed/bathing time/brushing teeth and combing hair.

### UNDER SENSITIVITY:

- Prefers passive activities.
- Unaware/less aware of touch and temperatures (does not get cold easily).
- Unaware/less aware of sounds (seems as if he/she is not listening).
- Unaware/less aware of own body in space (would bump into things/people regularly).
- Unaware/less aware of pain (does not get hurt/perceive pain easily).

### SEEKING BEHAVIOUR:

- Spins/swings/tumbles and turns/sways (in attempt to seek movement).
- Climbs/jumps impulsively.
- Feels/ touches/chews everything.
- Very little to no personal space.
- Sings/makes noises.
- Impulsive and often perceived as naughty.

## PERCEPTUAL INDICATORS

- Unsure of shapes/colours/sizes/ numbers/ bodyparts.
- Inefficient knowledge regarding terms like up, down, in front, behind etc.
- Can't discriminate between left and right.
- Draws pictures/numbers /letters in reverse or upside down.
- Struggles to build a puzzle.
- Struggles to identify small differences.
- Struggles to complete a pattern.
- Struggles to construct (games like pegboard and tangram).
- Struggles to write within the lines..

## WORK SKILLS AND OTHER INDICATORS:

- Needs constant reminding and support to complete tasks.
- Slow work speed.
- Takes long to get going and does not complete tasks.
- Low self-esteem
- Anxious
- Inadequate focus and concentration.
- Behavioural problems.
- Low motivation.
- Still wets bed.



# NOW, TO FINISH OFF.... WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS TO RESPOND TO A CHILD ACTING OUT

Some experts believe you should look for the root cause of acting out before implementing a consequence or considering treatment. Others believe that a child's behaviour cannot always be understood and that discipline and boundaries should be put in place. I believe in the combination of both. Kids aren't always rational, so while you consider the underlying reasons for acting out, it is important to implement boundaries and consequences. Here are some general things to consider doing when your child acts out.

- **STAY CALM:** Even if you have to take a few deep breaths first, it's important to remain calm and in control when your kids act out.
- **SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS:** A child with a developing brain cannot create structure and boundaries for themselves yet, although we often expect of them to be little adults. They are not and by not creating structure and boundaries with consequences for them we are doing more harm than good. Make sure your children have clear boundaries and know what you expect of them and what the consequences will be if they act out. Then, make sure you follow through. **CONSISTENCY IS KEY – MAKE SURE THAT YOUR YES IS YOUR YES AND YOUR NO IS YOUR NO.**
- **PROVIDE CONSEQUENCES:** In general, consequences should be immediate, consistent, and age-appropriate.

## WHY AND WHEN YOUR CHILD MAY NEED TO SEE A THERAPIST

If your child's behaviour doesn't improve or you identify any one of the following symptoms and the behaviour seems to get worse, you may want to get some assistance from your Occupational Therapist or Educational Psychologist.

1. **Regression:** It is common for kids to regress after major life changes, such as the birth of a new sibling, a move, or a parent's divorce. However, regressions such as bedwetting, excessive fearfulness, tantrums, and clinginess unrelated to a change may be a sign of an issue.
2. **Destructive Behaviours:** If your child is engaging in repeated destructive behaviours (injuring themselves, digging their nails into the skin to try to cause pain, or other acts of self-harm). Often, self-harm is a mask that numbs deeper anger, pain, or resentment. The help of a therapist can make a world of difference in these situations.
3. **Extreme Feelings of Sadness or Worry:** If a child seems unusually anxious, sad, or irritable for an extended period of time and it is getting in the way of their ability to do things they normally do, it is a good idea to seek help. Pay attention if your child is crying a lot or excessively worrying.
4. **Disruptive Behaviour:** If your child's behaviour is disrupting your family or getting them in trouble in school, something more might be going on. Many children express emotions through negative behaviours, such as acting out, talking back to teachers, or fighting with friends. Before you jump to discipline, think about whether talking to someone may be a better solution.
5. **Social Isolation:** Social withdrawal or isolation from peers is a sign that something may be wrong. This is especially concerning if this behaviour is a big change from their usual personality. Social isolation can be a sign of depression or anxiety.
6. **Increased Physical Complaints:** Sometimes mental health issues in kids take the form of physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomach-aches. Once you have ruled out any medical issues with a healthcare provider, your next step may be a mental health professional. Some life experiences are inherently difficult, stressful, or emotional, and having a professional or neutral party to talk to could benefit your child.

7. **Talking About Death Frequently:** It is normal for kids to explore the concept of death and talk about it in a curious way, particularly after the loss of a pet or family member, but repeated talk about death and dying warrants some exploration. Listen for statements about suicide, self-harm, or thoughts about killing other people.
8. **Stressful Situations:** While it is normal for kids to feel sad, confused, or frustrated during difficult situations, they may not have the adequate coping skills to process these feelings. Life changes and stressful situations can present challenges that kids have trouble facing alone. If your child appears to be struggling after a big change like a move, divorce, changing schools, death, new sibling, or even a breakup or falling out with a friend, consider getting them extra support.

**YOU AS PARENTS AND TEACHERS SPEND A GREAT DEAL OF A  
LITTLE ONE'S WEEK WITH THEM!**

**YOU ARE THUS A CRUCIAL LINK TO KIDS GETTING THE HELP  
THEY NEED- NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THIS!**

**Thank you for taking the time to read this article!**

*Take care of your kids - challenging behaviour often occurs when the demands  
and expectations being placed upon a child outstrip the skills they have to  
respond*

**– Ross Greene**