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Listening, learning, and living together: it's the science of life.

Goals of Negative Behavior¹

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Children misbehave for a variety of reasons in order to get their needs met. Instead of reacting to the problem, parents can ask, "How is this behavior making me feel right now, and what emotional need is my child seeking to fulfill?"

If you feel annoyed and irritated, the child's purpose may be to get your attention. The most basic need of children is the need to belong—to feel valued and connected. This makes attention one of the strongest motives for a child's misbehavior. If you feel powerless and out of control, that's because your child's purpose is to gain power and control over you. Children want to be able to influence their environment, including their parents. Rebellion often comes when children feel inadequate to do this.

If you feel hurt by your child's behavior, the purpose may be revenge. Children perceive setbacks as if they were being singled out by others for punishment. They feel victimized and seek relief from their hurt feelings through acts of revenge. If you feel discouraged and helpless when your child misbehaves, their purpose is to withdraw from the situation in order to maintain their immature sense of pride and to escape the reality of their own limitations.

1. This document is FAR0081, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published March 2009. In the interest of time or clarity, the broadcast version of this script may have been modified. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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The solution is to understand the child's reason for misbehaving. This allows the parent to disengage from the mischief and feel competent to handle the situation while not taking it personally. Then the child's behavior, as well as any emotional needs, can be attended to.

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