

# Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Understanding Reasons for Misbehavior<sup>1</sup>

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**Goal:** To help grandparents understand reasons their grandchildren misbehave and how this knowledge can help them to be a better grandparent.



Credits: Hemera

Parenting is a challenge the first time around. Becoming a parent the second time can be a greater challenge. This is especially true if your new role as parent is a direct result of a crisis situation. Grandchildren who have lived in an unstable family need a lot of tender, loving care. They may experience feelings of anger, hurt, guilt, and loss. These feelings may lead to misbehavior. However, the way you deal with your grandchildren's feelings and how you guide their behavior will be crucial to how well they adjust to their new home.

## Reasons for Misbehavior

All children misbehave at times. Some throw temper tantrums, yell, scream, or hit. Others may disobey rules or fight with their brothers, sisters, or cousins. Kids are curious and impulsive by nature, and they can find many ways to misbehave, especially when they are in new situations.

As a new parent for the second time, it is important to identify the reasons for your grandchild's misbehavior if you want to help. Knowing why your grandchild misbehaves can make a difficult situation easier to handle, opening the door to a more meaningful and positive relationship. The following are some reasons why grandchildren misbehave.

## Basic Needs Not Met

When a child's basic needs for food, personal space, shelter, safety, clothing, sleep, and exercise are not met, it affects her or his well-being. The lack of basic needs results in the following:

Basic Need	Consequence
Hunger	If a child is hungry, he may become cranky, whiny, and unpleasant.
Lack of sleep	If a child is overly tired, she may become more easily frustrated and have a temper tantrum.
Lack of activity	If a child is bored, he may be more prone to get into mischief.
Lack of personal space	If a child does not have enough space to move and play, she may begin acting out and become disruptive.

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## Negative Feelings

A child's behavior can be affected by the experiences she or he had in life. A child in a crisis situation may feel betrayed, confused, fearful, and rejected. Do you recognize any of these feelings in your grandchild?

- angry
- distrustful
- resentful
- depressed
- guilty
- isolated
- jealous
- scared
- hopeless
- helpless
- homesick
- moody
- disappointed
- hurt
- sad

Children who have had negative life experiences may express their feelings through inappropriate behaviors such as hitting, biting, fighting, not following rules, and constant arguing. Children need a sensitive adult who can recognize their feelings. They need an adult who will listen and not judge whether their feelings are good or bad. They also need a caring adult who can teach them how to express their feelings in more appropriate ways.

## Poor Self-Control

Some children are more impulsive and may be behind other kids their age in learning to control their behaviors or thoughts. Children are not born with self-control—it must be nurtured and taught. For some children, poor self-control may be due to a health condition or side effects of medication. Other times it can be related to a disability such as a learning disability or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Consult with your doctor or other health professional if you feel that your grandchild is having difficulty learning to manage their thoughts and behaviors. Some of the symptoms may be as follows:

Hyperactive/Impulsive	Inattention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Excessively fidgety, squirm/leaves seat, blurts out answers</li><li>• Difficulty waiting in line</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Often easily distracted, or fails to pay attention</li><li>• Easily forgetful and fails to complete tasks</li></ul>

Children with these behaviors often find it difficult to think before they act. They may tend to react with negative feelings and other harmful behaviors.

Grandparents can help their grandchildren learn self-control by being good role models by remaining calm and explaining the consequences for misbehavior without arguing. Children with poor self-control also benefit from routine. Sticking to a daily schedule, while preparing children for unscheduled events, will reduce frustration and lets your grandchildren practice self-control in a safe/secure environment.

## Inborn Traits

Children are unique. Some children are generally more cheerful, energetic, and upbeat. Others tend to be more easily angered, impulsive, or defiant. In addition, children can become moody and overly cautious in new situations. These are not learned behaviors—these are inborn traits called temperament. Research has found that most children exhibit one of three types of temperament:

1. **Easy child** – Follows rules most of the time, accepts change easily, and generally remains in a good mood.
2. **Slow to warm up** – Negative in mood and adjusts slowly to new experiences.
3. **Difficult** – Has many temper tantrums, gets overly excited, argues and does not adapt well to new situations.

Which temperament best describes each of your grandchildren? It is difficult to distinguish between learned behavior and inborn temperament. You might think that learned behavior can be changed but inborn traits cannot. This is not true. Temperament can be changed through the parenting skills we use.

Children who are “difficult” or who have poor self-control need a little extra loving care. They need grandparents who are patient and who respond to misbehavior calmly. They need someone who won't take things personally but who can take a step back, look at the situation, and ask themselves “What is going on in this situation that may be affecting my grandchild?” Your grandchildren need someone to recognize their positive traits and to provide

opportunities to develop these traits (e.g., sports, music lessons, etc.).

## Test Your Knowledge

Many factors can contribute to your grandchild's misbehavior. Identifying the causes can help you guide her or his behavior. In the scenarios below, try to identify the misbehavior and the reasons.

1. Luis, age 3, has been shopping with you for the past four hours. When you tell him that there is one more store to go to, he throws a temper tantrum.

Misbehavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Sarah and Susie start fighting soon after their mother, who was visiting for the day, leaves unexpectedly.

Misbehavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Erica, age 8, has recently made friends with a group you don't approve of. You talk to her about it and she starts screaming curse words you don't use at home.

Misbehavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

## Answers to Questions

1. Temper tantrum; basic needs not met, tired and hungry
2. Fighting; negative feelings, frustrated and hurt
3. Screaming curse words; poor self-control

## Resources

Parenting 24/7: <http://parenting247.org/>

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