

## WHEN “GOOD BEHAVIOR” IS MISBEHAVIOR

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A number of years ago, a young girl in my classroom girl (we'll call her Marsha) was caught doing something unkind to one of her friends (let's call her friend Jan). As I have always done, I brought the two children together to talk about the situation and to problem solve. The conversation, however, took a turn for the worse, when the Marsha burst into deep, uncontrollable sobs. Her friend, Jan, was taken aback and couldn't understand why her friend was so upset. Wasn't *she* the one who should be crying! Nevertheless, Marsha was inconsolable.

After things settled down, and I began to talk to Marsha about what had happened, she disclosed why she was so upset. During our conversation, Marsha did not mention that she felt remorse for hurting her friend's feelings, or that she was worried about damaging the relationship. She was mortified for having done something wrong; and even more devastated that her mistake had been seen by others.

Marsha was the perfect student. She excelled academically (after high school she attended one of the most prestigious ivy league schools in the country); she always followed the classroom ground rules; she excelled in extra-curricular activities; she was cooperative with adults and other children; and, she could always be counted on to do “the right thing.” She was the model of “good behavior.” However, when she made a significant error in attempt at something challenging, or made a social or relational mistake she felt like a failure, that she was inadequate.

All humans crave the acceptance of our fellows. We want to belong and feel significant. It is part of our makeup. According to Alfred Adler, the reason that children (and adults) misbehave is because they are discouraged in their attempt to gain belonging and significance, even if that discouragement comes from their own perception rather than reality.

Marsha's “good behavior” was actually misbehavior. While her outwardly “good conduct” had significant rewards, socially and academically, she was terrified of not being perfect and making a mistake that might meet with disapproval, which, to her, would mean that *she* was bad. She put herself under incredible pressure. These feelings and perceptions in a child, if left unchecked, are potentially dangerous. They can manifest themselves in some pretty serious difficulties, including but not limited to depression and anxiety. For a child, like Marsha, one of my goals was to help her to learn to be comfortable making mistakes, and even comfortable “getting in trouble.”

Adults, with the best of intentions, and without realizing it, often invite the misbehavior of perfectionism or “good behavior” by putting too much emphasis on a child being good. It can take the form of over-validation and praise, as well as over-correcting when a child makes a mistake. For the child who naturally leans towards being good or perfect and pleasing adults, too much validation or criticism can actually cause them to become dependent upon the praise of others. When this occurs, they become much less able to bounce back from the smallest of mistakes, and their good behavior is motivated by an attempt to win approval and not by self-fulfillment through social responsibility.

To help children who have the inclination to please or be the “good child” it is vital to create an environment where it is OK to make mistakes. For the Marsha's of the world, they need to know that they are OK even if they make a mistake, and that mistakes are truly an opportunity to learn, and not a

judgment on who they are. It is also important to help them to wean off external validation, and to focus on progress rather than outcomes. If you have a “good child”, here are some suggestions to help them build their own emotional resilience and confidence:

1. Focus on the process and progress when giving encouragement. “I notice that you worked really hard on that piece of work.” Or, “You seem really interested in the guitar. Tell me about it.”
2. Avoid comparison talk, and instead focus on contributions and feelings. “You got three hits this game, and helped your team to score two more runs. How do you feel about your contribution?”
3. When a child makes a mistake emphasize mistakes being *the* opportunity to learn, and celebrate the mistake and the effort. “Congratulations, I noticed that you made three mistakes. That means you tried and had an opportunity to learn and fix them. Nice work.”
4. For older children, talk about what you see in their behavior, and how you can support them. “I notice that you’re really hard on yourself when you make mistakes, and that you are really worried about disappointing me. I love you, not what you do. Let’s work on a plan together so I can help support you in not being perfect!”
5. Encourage risks. The “good child” often chooses activities because they know they will be successful. With kindness, and a smile, let them know what you see. “I notice that you always choose the younger children to play checkers with. Is it possible you may need to take some more risks and lose a little more?”
6. Make sure your children get the message that getting up is more important than falling down. Be sure to give tons of encouragement for a child’s resilience rather than the outcome.
7. Allow your kids to quit activities only after an agreed number of tries (I would suggest 3-5 tries). Not giving them an out and making them finish the entire session of a lesson or a season may inhibit a perfectionist from trying another activity. Also, allowing them to quit after only trying something once may set up a pattern of quitting as a solution to not being the best.

“If I could eliminate forever four phrases from our language in the interest of healthy people, it would be “good boy, “bad boy,” “good girl,” and “bad girl,” and all their related derivatives. Keep what people do separate from who they are so that a bad act doesn’t make a person bad nor a good act make a person good. This is an important key to healthy self-esteem.”<sup>1</sup>

1. H. Stephen Glenn, *Developing Healthy Self Esteem* (Orem, UT: Empowering People Books, Tapes and videos, 1989 videocassette)