

Chapter 2 – Preventing Misbehavior

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Many caretakers justify their use of spanking and punishments as a way to prevent what they perceive as misbehavior. They believe that children won't learn to behave properly if their misbehavior is not met with undesirable consequences. Children dislike being hit, so it's believed that children will cease behaving improperly in order to avoid getting hit. Let's put aside any empirical evidence on the effectiveness of spanking for this reason, and instead focus on why it's unnecessary.

Needs-based Behavior

I don't believe that anyone, children included, does anything out of sheer randomness. Rather, human action is purposeful, which purpose is ultimately the meeting of our need to alleviate our felt uneasiness about the state of things around us. This is the great insight discovered by economist Ludwig von Mises in the early 20th Century. He wrote, "The incentive that impels a man to act is always some uneasiness." And he proved it with, "A man perfectly content with the state of his affairs would have no incentive to change things." (8) Therefore, Acting Man, or Acting Child, is behaving in such a way as to remove his felt uneasiness. His actions may or may not meet this need, but because he has faith that they will, he acts. (9)

Misbehavior

Unfortunately for the child his actions are sometimes viewed unfavorably by his caretaker and labelled as "misbehavior". Is that because they are inherently unfavorable? If they are the wrong actions to meet the child's needs, then I suppose we could say that, but that's from the child's perspective. From the caretaker's, the characteristic of "unfavorable" or "bad" is purely a subjective determination; the behavior bothers the caretaker (and possibly others) in some way. Why it bothers the caretaker is the caretaker's prerogative. Should the child be punished for the opinion of the caretaker? If the child's behavior is damaging towards himself or others (or their property), the caretaker has every right to intervene, but what is the point of the caretaker reacting violently or punitively to the child in error?

Spanking Mistreats the Symptom

The only point that I can see is that the parent has yet to work out his own problems, likely having a cause in childhood, and erroneously employs the wrong means to alleviate his

own feeling of uneasiness.(10) However, spanking the child for his misbehavior is treating the symptom, and a mistreatment at that. Why is the child misbehaving? I can think of only three reasons: 1) the child is not actually misbehaving, he's just behaving in a way that annoys his caretaker, 2) the child has faith in the wrong means to achieve his desired ends, and 3) some need of the child's that can only be provided by his caretaker has gone unmet, leading to confusion and anger.

Will spanking properly treat any of these causes for misbehavior? Let's see. On 1), spanking is an irrational reaction by the caretaker that will only cause pain and resentment. Rather than spanking, perhaps the caretaker could re-evaluate what he finds annoying, and try to view the situation in a new light. And/or, he could ask the child for a moment, seek to understand why the child is doing what he's doing, and negotiate a way to help him meet his need without annoying his caretaker.(11) On 2) likewise, spanking will cause pain and resentment, and it doesn't do anything to teach the child proper means to achieve his desired ends. Instead of spanking, the caretaker could once again seek understanding and negotiate with the child a better way to meet his needs. On 3), spanking ignores the unmet needs, and creates new ones. Clearly, the caretaker could figure out, by himself or in league with other caretakers, where he's failed to meet his child's needs (and they are not few), and then attempt to make things right. It's even a possibility that the child can help the caretaker figure out where things went wrong.(12)

As can be seen, spanking is unnecessary as a tool to prevent misbehavior. We're all trying the best we can to meet our need to remove felt uneasiness about the state of things around us. Children are no different, other than their lack of knowledge and wisdom. They will no doubt "misbehave" as a matter of trying to figure things out for themselves. Responding with violence is totally unnecessary and *quite* counterproductive when you understand the causes – and their cures – for so-called misbehavior.

(8) See the Mises Wiki entry for "Uneasiness" at <http://skyler.link/misesuneasiness>

(9) Read "Action, Faith, and Voluntaryism" by the author at <http://skyler.link/evcactionfaith>

(10) Read "Five Reasons Not to Have Children" by Daniel Mackler, particularly the first and third reasons, at <http://skyler.link/wtn5reasons>

(11) Read "Why Negotiate with Children?" by the author at <http://skyler.link/evcnegotiate>

(12) Read Chapter 3, "Active Listening: The Language of Acceptance" of *Parent Effectiveness Training*, by Thomas Gordon at <http://skyler.link/petactivelistening>

Next – Chapter 3, Hurting Themselves or Others