



CATEGORIZE MISBEHAVIOR FIRST, THEN CONQUER!

Child Development and Rehabilitation Center
Oregon Health & Science University



Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health therapist if needed.

Often when parents are worried about their children's misbehavior, they lump all problems together. By doing so, parents may accidentally use the wrong parenting approach for certain misbehaviors. For example, parents may use their "big gun" discipline for whining or pouting as well as for hitting and kicking. Doing this can lessen the success of discipline because the strategy gets overused. For young children, parents are encouraged to split misbehavior into two general categories: 1) **Annoying/Obnoxious** and 2) **Dangerous/Destructive**. Categorizing misbehavior is helpful because *how* a parent addresses misbehavior in each of these categories should be different.

Annoying/Obnoxious Behavior:

Boy, are these upsetting, but they really don't hurt anyone! Misbehavior that should fall into this category usually involves things that your child does that can be upsetting and annoying to others, but don't pose any risk for harm to self, others, or property. Many of these things are verbal. Examples of Annoying/Obnoxious behavior include, but are not limited to:

- Smart talk, such as "I don't have to" or "You can't make me."
- Name calling, such as "You pig," or "You stink."
- Emotionally-laden back talk, such as "You don't love me," "I wish I had a different mommy," or "You're the worst dad ever!"
- Swearing or saying curse words (I don't think you need examples! You know what these are).
- Whining, pouting, or screaming
- Tantrums that don't include aggression or property destruction

Dangerous/Destructive Behavior:

Ouch, that smarts! Misbehavior that should fall into this category includes actions that pose the risk of harm to the child, others, and/or property. In other words, they are serious and need to stop. Many of these are actions, rather than verbal. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Hitting, kicking, scratching or biting other children
- Hitting, kicking, scratching or biting adults

- Tearing up books
- Smashing others' toys or belongings
- Noncompliance

What should you do?

- 1) You are encouraged to **categorize your child's misbehaviors** into both of these categories. Create two lists, one for Annoying/Obnoxious behaviors and the other for Dangerous/Destructive behaviors.
- 2) **Discipline differently** based on the category of misbehavior.
 - a. Reserve your “big guns,” like time out, grounding, or loss of privileges for misbehaviors that fall into the **Dangerous/Destructive** category.
 - b. For behaviors that fall into the **Annoying/Obnoxious** category, use strategies such as Active Ignoring; brief verbal corrections; sending your child to another room to play; and walking away. Quite often, these behaviors persist because either your child has learned that they push your buttons and/or because s/he is upset. Therefore, the best strategy is to avoid adding fuel to the fire and use Active Ignoring strategies, such as turning your back, acting as if you don't hear your child, walking away from your child, and so forth. **Consistent ignoring** of these behaviors is likely to reduce them over time.

An example:

Carlos is 4, and his mother made the following lists to categorize his misbehaviors and write down consequences that she wants to use for the behaviors:

<p>Annoying/Obnoxious:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Talking to me and interrupting me while I am on the phone -Yelling at me when he is mad -Whining when he doesn't get his way or when he can't get to a toy 	<p>Consequences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Completely ignore this. (I may need to take a couple deep breaths) Move into the next room if needed. -Say, “Please use a calm voice” and then ignore him if he keeps yelling. -Remind him to ask for help if he needs it. Walk away if he starts tugging on my leg.
<p>Dangerous/Destructive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Hitting or biting his brother -Tearing up books and magazines 	<p>Consequences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Time out or sent to his room immediately. -Say “it is not ok to tear things up, you need a time out” and send him to time out.