

# **Ain't Misbehavin'**

Understanding the Causes of Behavior and  
Determining How to Create Improvement

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Bridges of Hope

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# **Ain't Misbehavin'**

Understanding the Causes of Behavior and  
Determining How to Create Improvement

What is "behavior"?

Grouping behaviors – e.g., cooperation, upb.

What is a contingency?  
If/Then or When/Then

What causes behavior to happen?  
Elicit versus emit  
B(f)C

Want something AND get it – light switch analogy

How do you fix this?

Data!

Skill development – finite pie

Practice

Reinforcement

3 : 1

Reactivity

## **References:**

Forehand, Rex, Parenting the Strong Willed Child  
Latham, Glenn, The Power of Positive Parenting  
Patterson, Gerald, Living with Children; Families

**Website:** [www.aintmisbehavin.com](http://www.aintmisbehavin.com)

## **"The Magnificent Seven"**

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Key critical skills help children and adults in a broad variety of situations. These are rarely explicitly included in instructional or behavioral programs. All of us are helped to succeed by being good at these "Magnificent Seven!".

1. Cooperating
2. Being Interrupted
3. Accepting Denials
4. Understanding Choices
5. Flexibility
6. Waiting
7. Leisure Engagement

1. **Cooperating.** Examples of the importance of cooperation abound in everyday life. We stop at Stop signs, wait in line at the grocery store, open a door for someone else, hand someone something they request, etc. Most of the children we are asked to assist have developed very little of this skill, and this causes them and others problems. A child is asked to sit down, does not, and a struggle can ensue. A child is asked to "come here", does not, and a chase and struggle can ensue. A child is asked to stay indoors, does not, and a chase and struggle can ensue.

Some research suggests that a person must cooperate readily with 80% or better of the requests made of her or him to be considered cooperative and to stay out of trouble. So, complete cooperation with 80% or more of the things you ask your child to do, within three requests over three minutes, is the objective.

a. How to: There are several pieces to this 'cooperation' program.

- ❖ Count how often cooperation now occurs at present. Include total number of attempts to 'get cooperation' from your child as well as successes, to yield a proportion.
- ❖ Reduce the number of requests you make of your child, especially repeating the same request over and over. This may seem unusual but has the effect of automatically improving the ratio of times your child does as asked.
- ❖ Identify as many things as possible that are things you know your child likes to do, to provide a number of requests with which s/he is likely to cooperate.
- ❖ Pick good times to practice. All day is best, but may be unrealistic at first.
- ❖ Reinforce cooperation very powerfully. (When I say the word "reinforce" I mostly mean to tell your child "That was great. You \_\_\_\_\_ exactly the way I would like you to. Thanks." Adding a 'treat' is at your discretion. Please see the document "275 Ways to Say 'Good Job'.")
- ❖ Continue to keep track.

b. Some particularly useful requests are:

- ❖ "Stay with me, please."
- ❖ "Stay in your (the, this) room (house), please."
- ❖ Various forms of "Do this." E.g., "I would like you to watch this video for a half hour." "Time for your bath." "Please finish eating so I can clean the table."

c. Start with requests that are likely to be cooperated with by your child (usually requests to engage in a favorite activity). Then, when some cooperation has been established, begin to make the requests more and more difficult.

NOTE: "Come here, please." is being treated here as a special class of request related to interruption of ongoing activity and is discussed separately below.

- ❖ Approach your child.
- ❖ Get her or his attention, usually by speaking her or his name, getting close face to face, etc.
- ❖ Make your request.
- ❖ Verbally reinforce (praise) any movement in the right direction. (See the document "Descriptive Acknowledgment" for further guidance here.)
- ❖ Continue to reinforce as long as your child continues to cooperate.
- ❖ If necessary, repeat your request.
- ❖ Provide only three statements of your request, maximum. After three, help your child cooperate. This is usually done by gentle physical guidance. (See the document "Guided Practice" for further guidance here.)
- ❖ Reinforce any movement in the right direction, even if you are doing the work.
- ❖ Continue reinforcing for as long as possible.
- ❖ When the request is fully met, offer your child something extra, e.g., a favorite plaything, alone time with you.
- ❖ Score this a success.

d. Avoid physical struggle. If it becomes too strenuous to get your request accomplished, drop it. Say "We can do this later." Score it a failure. Remember to return in 30 to 60 minutes to try again. Try to plan better for success, for example by requesting a more preferred activity or offering greater reinforcement.

e. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. This means avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, avoid correction or scolding. (See the "Nonreactive Monitoring".)

f. Repair problems such as your child moving away from you or resisting by increasing/improving the reinforcement offered for successful performance.

2. **Being Interrupted.** One of the things that most children referred to us have great difficulty with is calmly interrupting an ongoing activity. Yet this is a very important part of everyday life. When this is a problem, most parents do many things to avoid interrupting their children, often arranging their own schedules around their child's.

a. How To: The focus of this program is to offer your child practice in being interrupted and tolerating it. Count how often you now interrupt your child on a regular basis daily. Whatever this number is, double it. (If the number you come up with is fewer than 10 interruptions daily, start with 10 interruptions per day.) This is the number of interruptions you want to arrange to happen each day. Start by interrupting things your child does not very much mind interrupting, even things s/he dislikes.

b. Approach your child. Provide preparatory information: "We have to turn off your video in five minutes and go pick up sister." Walk away, no matter how your child responds. (If s/he immediately turns off the video, you can use this situation for practice without

preparation.) Provide two more preparatory statements, at 3 and 1 minute before the actual interruption. When time to interrupt, approach your child and say “Okay, time to turn it off and get in the car.” Or whatever is relevant to the situation. Reinforce any movement in the right direction. Continue to reinforce as long as your child continues to move in the right direction. If not, assist. Turn off or remove all materials. Physically assist your child to move on to the activity for which you are interrupting the current one. Reinforce (praise) all movement in the right direction, even if you are doing all the work. When the interruption is successfully completed, offer an extra reward. Count this as a success. Start with easy things to interrupt, working up to more and more difficult until your child can easily interrupt any activity even her/his most favorite.

c. Avoid struggling. As above, break off and try again later. Score this a failure.

d. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. This means avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, and avoid corrective or scolding statements.

e. A subskill here is cooperating with two common verbal interruptions of ongoing behavior. First is pausing what one is doing in response to being addressed by name. Second is approaching when asked to do so (“Come here, please.”), which often follows immediately after pausing when one’s name is called. Note that these are skills common to adults and children who are generally considered cooperative, responsive, and interactive, and are not just something to be taught children assigned a diagnosis or engaging in problematic behavior.

f. How to: There are many procedural similarities across skills discussed here. Pause activity and look at the speaker when one’s name is called: First, count how often this now occurs at present. Include total number of attempts to ‘get the attention’ of the person (i.e., call her or his name) as well as successes, to yield a proportion. Second, try to make every attempt successful. How this is done will depend largely on the data so far collected and other things known about the child. For example, it is likely to be easier to get a successful response during an activity in which the child is not very engaged than during one in which s/he is quite absorbed. If the starting proportion of successful attempts is quite low, it may be necessary to begin with the child within arm’s length. If the starting proportion is higher, this may not be as important. Using a prearranged daily frequency, no fewer than 10, say the child’s name. Wait briefly (1 to 3 seconds) for the correct response. Try to avoid any consistencies other than the calling of the child’s name. Vary time of day, situation, activity, position, even tone of voice as much as possible. Reinforce a correct response. If not successful on the first attempt, approach to within arm’s length of the child. Gently prepare to turn the child’s head towards you, without yet touching her/him. Say the child’s name, immediately turn her/his head towards you, and immediately reinforce. If the starting proportion of successful attempts is very low, use only this part of this procedure until you detect some anticipatory movement of the child’s head in your direction immediately preceding your assistance. At that point, begin to wait briefly for independent success.

g. Avoid physical struggle. If it becomes too strenuous to get your request accomplished, drop it. Say “We can do this later.” Score it a failure. Remember to return in 30 to 60 minutes to try again.

h. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. Avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, and avoid correction or scolding.

i. Repair problems such as your child moving away from you or resisting having her/his head turned by increasing/improving the reinforcement offered for successful performance.

j. "Come here, please." First, count how often the child responds correctly at present. Include total number of attempts as well as successes, to yield a proportion. Again, start within arm's length if the starting proportion of successful attempts is low. Practice at least 10 times daily, varying everything except the words spoken. Reinforce successes occurring on the first attempt. Use guided practice (physical assistance) on any second attempt. Say "Come here, please." Then, immediately retrieve the child and walk her or him to the spot where you were when you first said "Come here, please." As you walk, say "Come here, please." Reinforce when you have arrived at the point from which you first said "Come here, please." If the starting proportion of successful attempts is very low, use only this part of this procedure until you detect some anticipatory movement of the child in your direction immediately preceding your assistance. At that point, begin to wait briefly for independent success.

k. Avoid physical struggle. If it becomes too strenuous to get your request accomplished, drop it. Say "We can do this later." Score it a failure. Remember to return in 30 to 60 minutes to try again.

l. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. Avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, and avoid correction or scolding.

m. Repair problems such as your child moving away from you or resisting by increasing/improving the reinforcement offered for successful performance.

3. **Accepting Denials.** Most of the children referred to us have great difficulty being refused something they have requested. You might think of this program as teaching your child to "take 'no' for an answer". Here again, practice makes perfect.

a. How to: Determine a number of things that it won't be very hard for your child to be denied, for your starting point. Count the number of times you now refuse your child something s/he requests, and double it. (If the number you come up with is fewer than 10 times, start with 10 refusals a day.) As the day progresses, make sure you keep up with enough refusals to meet your daily goal. Any amount of acceptance your child exhibits, reinforce socially (verbal, hug, etc.) Any complete acceptance of a refusal, without disruptive behavior, offer an extra reward. Count this a success.

b. If your child begins to fuss, attempt to access her/his choice independently, etc., ignore everything you can. Make sure s/he does not successfully gain access to the things requested after you have said "no". Take it away if necessary.

c. Avoid physical struggle. If it becomes too strenuous to get your request accomplished, drop it. Say "We can do this later." Score it a failure. Remember to return in 30 to 60 minutes to try again.

d. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. Avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, and avoid correction or scolding.

e. Repair problems such as your child moving away from you or resisting by increasing/improving the reinforcement offered for successful performance.

4. **Making Choices.** Many of the children referred to us have inadvertently and unfortunately learned that they may have or do virtually anything they want at virtually any moment, merely based on internal desire. This can cause great problems. Understanding that certain things are available at certain times, and certain things are unavailable at certain times, is very useful. This can be thought of as appreciating 'implicit menus'. When one goes to McDonald's one does not order sushi, because it is not on the (explicit) menu. Throughout our day we make choices based not only on explicit menus such as those available at restaurants but also on implicit menus. Implicit menus are contained in situational arrangements (e.g., you don't ask a police officer for a light bulb for your home) and in routine (e.g., you don't call a friend at 3:00 a.m. in the morning "just to talk"). Practice with this skill will pay great dividends.

a. How to: As much as possible, avoid situations in which your child simply approaches an activity and begins to engage in it, and situations in which your child approaches you and makes a request without having first been offered choices by you. Ideally, in either of these situations you would tell your child s/he may not engage in that activity. This focuses your child's attention on beginning to look around and understand what may be available. Try to remember to offer your child one of these things after about an hour without spontaneous requests.

b. Throughout the day, offer your child 'planned choices': "Between now and lunch, you can watch a video, play outside, or use your computer. What do you want to do?" Your child must choose from one of the things you have offered, nothing else. Your child must continue engaging in the chosen activity until the next time you offer choices. For this reason, you may want to start with small periods of time (e.g., 5 or 10 minutes.)

c. Reinforce cooperation and engagement, as often as possible, sometimes as often as once a minute at first. Interrupt your child's attempts to change the activity.

d. Spontaneous requests that may be honored include a request for liquids, for help, or to use the toilet. Eventually, you can teach your child to ask "What can I do now?" to prompt you to offer choices.

e. Remember that the point here is to help your child become someone others will enjoy being around, not you becoming a dictator! Count the number of spontaneous choices your child makes per day, looking for them to reduce over time. As you implement this structure, you should find that you are presented with more and more opportunities to teach your child new activities and amusements.

f. Avoid physical struggle. If it becomes too strenuous to get your request accomplished, drop it. Say "We can do this later." Score it a failure. Remember to return in 30 to 60 minutes to try again.

g. Completely ignore any disruptive behavior throughout. Avoid mentioning it, avoid eye contact while it is occurring, avoid allowing it to benefit your child, and avoid correction or scolding.

h. Repair problems such as your child moving away from you or resisting by increasing/improving the reinforcement offered for successful performance.

5. **Flexibility.** Things change. This is reflected in the common expression: “The only constant is change.” This makes it very important to prepare children to tolerate change without great difficulty. Many children inadvertently fall into routines or come to believe that the details of how things happen the first few times are all important, whether actually relevant or not.

For example, some children learn that “going to McDonald’s” or “going to the park” includes such things as where the child sits in the car, what car you go in, the streets, turns, starts and stops along the way, the particular McDonald’s or park to which you usually go, etc. Because we are all very much creatures of habit, this is to be expected. Studies show, for example, that most of us put on our clothing in the exact same sequence every time we dress, without even thinking about it. But for some children it can become a problem.

The intervention components to improve your child’s flexibility are shaping, practice, and reinforcement. The more chances your child has to experience change and learn that it rarely leads to something unpleasant the more flexible s/he will become. Start small and build up. Include lots of social, other reinforcement.

a. How to: First, you have to notice rigidity that has already gotten built in by accident. Then, start changing things. This may sound like a violation of the concept of developing a ‘routine’ to help your child know what to expect. It is important to have routines for things – more comfortable, less uncertain and anxiety provoking. But a ‘routine’ simply means that there is consistency in the occurrence of the major events. A bedtime routine, for example, may include a settling down activity, a snack, a bath, quiet time, a story, and the like. On occasion, it should be entirely possible to put a bath before snack, for example, without a major meltdown.

b. Second, you have to explore all the many ways in which you can increase flexibility. Sequence is an easy one. Other details work well also: what kind of snack, what kind of bath, what kind of book, who reads it, where, what kind of settling down activity, and more. In the McDonald’s or park example, you might consider varying the seat, the clothing, the car, the driver, the music listened to on the way, etc., as well as the streets and the particular McDonald’s or park visited.

c. Third, make changes that are small enough to be tolerable but big enough to be different. This may include sequence, route, materials, person, etc. For example, when going to McDonald’s or the park begin by entering a different driveway. Next, take a different street at the very end of the trip. Etc. In general, make one change at a time.

d. One aspect of flexibility that is also important of other skills discussed here (e.g., making choices) is the concept of “external” versus “internal” referents. When your child is put off by changes in routine it tells you that s/he is paying attention mostly to what is going on INSIDE her or him. E.g., “This isn’t how we usually do this!” For Flexibility, as well as for Cooperation, Interruptions, etc., paying attention mostly to what is going on OUTSIDE oneself is



important. We know, for example, that it is possible to start at the same place (home) and end at the same place (McDonald's) without anything in between being the same as it was the last time, or many times. Teaching this knowledge to your children sometimes requires special arrangements such as described here.

e. For maximum flexibility, we usually recommend that a rigid routine not be established at all. A settling down activity, a snack, a bath, quiet time, and a story may all be consistent elements of a nighttime routine. But, the order of these need not be rigidly adhered to (e.g., a bath may come before or after a snack). And, the elements of these need not be rigidly adhered to (e.g., a snack may be graham crackers sometimes, toast sometimes, popcorn sometimes, and a choice among the three sometimes; a story may be one chosen by you or by your child; a bath may include bubbles or not, may last 10 or 30 minutes.)

f. Avoiding rigidity means beginning to think about what your child is experiencing right from the very first instance of something. Take a different route to McDonald's (or school, therapy, shopping) beginning the second time you do it. The more you can help your child learn what that it doesn't matter how you get there as long as the starting and ending points remain constant, the more you are helping her or him to grow up as someone who 'fits' into the world well.

6. **Waiting** is an integral part of everyday life familiar to us all. We wait for food to get cooked so we can eat it. We wait in a certain place so we may board a streetcar, when it arrives. We wait in line to pay a bridge toll. We wait until someone gets off the telephone to speak with them. We wait for the bathroom to be free so we can use it. We wait our turn in conversation and games. We wait for a favorite television program to come on. We wait through the commercials during a program. We wait in line at the supermarket checkout. We wait for the bell to ring to change classes. We wait for our family members to all come home so we can stop worrying. We wait for seeds to sprout. We wait for our plane to reach its destination. We wait until everyone else is ready to begin an activity. We wait for an answer to a question we have asked . . . The list is endless.

Most of us over the years learn or teach ourselves to wait successfully. We mostly do this on our own, though there are also many 'tips' about waiting available in the general culture. Children and adults considered disabled are unlikely to "pick up" waiting skills without specific instruction. One important part of this is the recognition that waiting involves numerous skills, not just one. Another important part of this is the development of a specific teaching strategy designed to promote development of waiting skills.

This is a truism in the realm of disabilities – virtually everything must be specifically taught.

a. How to:

- ❖ Introduce random (arbitrary) practice. This means asking your child to 'wait' at various times during the day, without regard to the situation or need but simply for practice.
- ❖ Shape increased waiting skill. This means to start by asking your child to wait for several seconds and then to gradually and systematically increase the waiting time to as much as 30 minutes.
- ❖ Use external indicators. This means to point out to your child the things that are making waiting necessary: there are five people in front of us; chicken takes 45 minutes to cook; the trolley comes on a schedule sometimes disrupted by traffic and other things; etc.

- ❖ Offer your child 'filler' activities. Most of us have taught ourselves to bring things to do when we anticipate the need to wait for a long time. This might be music on a Walkman type machine, books or magazines, and so on.
- ❖ "Expect to wait" – One hidden aspect here is that we have developed methods of anticipating the need to wait that usually work. For example, we expect to wait at the DMV or at the airport. We do not usually expect to wait when going out to take a walk. If we prepare and do not need to wait, so much the better. "Better to be prepared and not need to be than the other way around."
- ❖ Use external indicators – We learn that a long line of people all trying to get the same thing (e.g., coffee at Starbuck's) signals the need to wait, and even general parameters of waiting length. This is information that can be taught your child and is unlikely to be learned if not specifically taught.
- ❖ Practice: As with most skills, waiting skills will only develop usefully if arranged to be practiced successfully for longer and longer periods, in more and more different situations and environments, and with a variety of bridging activities.

b. Use the strategies introduced above to arrange practice of waiting.

## 7. Leisure Engagement –

This is a uniquely difficult area. Much of everyday life is made up of "keeping ourselves entertained", "finding something to do", and interacting socially in leisure and recreational settings. Many children and adults use their basic learning skills to develop self interests. Children with disabilities cannot be relied upon to negotiate this process. In general, if your child is to develop useful leisure skills s/he will have to be taught these. To arrange for these to happen need not be very difficult. To arrange for them to happen independently can be.

a. Solitary leisure. We suggest developing at least 5 different leisure skills in which your child can engage entirely alone: watching a video without interruption, watching television programs without commercials, watching television programs with commercials, looking through or reading books, listening to music (typically combined with other activities). Develop each skill to the level of 30 to 90 consecutive minutes without difficulty, with periodic 'check ins' (reinforcement opportunities) about every 10 – 15 minutes.

b. It is important to develop activities that work at home, outside of home, in the morning, afternoon, and evening, on different days of the week, especially weekdays versus weekends. Both generalization and variety are important.

c. Shape gradually and systematically development of each new skill. The start of watching television without disruption might begin with 10 seconds without difficulty, reinforced heavily, and go on to a different activity, at least briefly. Starting small and building slowly will insure better learning.

d. Practice each of these skills under many different conditions, working on expanding their availability.

e. Try to keep activities as "materials free" as possible. The overall point is to help someone develop self contained skills that enable her/him to be as other friendly as possible without requiring a large amount of materials or equipment.

f. How to:

- ❖ Explore as many activities and situations and examples as possible to begin to get an idea of what your child already has some interest in.
- ❖ Pick from one or more of these.
- ❖ Ask your child to “Go watch your ‘Bob the Builder’ video please. I have something to do.”
- ❖ Escort your child to the VCR and television.
- ❖ Help pick out a ‘Bob the Builder’ video.
- ❖ Help get the video started.
- ❖ Help your child sit in the exact position you think is most constructive, e.g., sitting upright on a chair or couch, with back against the back of the furniture, rear against the lower back of the furniture. Reinforce.
- ❖ Turn on the video and say “Please watch for a while. I’ll come and get you when it is time to change activities.”
- ❖ Leave.
- ❖ Return almost immediately, hoping to catch your child doing exactly what you expect her/him to be doing. If so, reinforce and end the activity: “Come, let’s go fold laundry.”
- ❖ Then, gradually build on this, e.g., add one minute daily.
- ❖ Some of this is not just exposure and opportunity but actual skill development.

g. Use the strategies introduced above to arrange practice of solitary leisure.

h. Shared leisure (recreation, playing). Much leisure engagement involves other people.

i. How to – “Joining In”: Most of us ‘scope out’ a situation for engagement opportunities and then involve ourselves in one or more of these without much explicit thought, at a party, meeting, sporting event, and the like. Teaching your child to do likewise can be immeasurably valuable.

- ❖ Accompany your child to an environment in which others are engaging in activities.
- ❖ Together view the different possibilities, labeling and discussing each in turn.
- ❖ Ask your child to make a choice of which activity to join, as with planned choices above.
- ❖ Reinforce scanning, choosing, and engagement.

j. Use the strategies introduced above to arrange practice of shared leisure.

k. “Appointed Leisure” – It is often important for children to be able to find something entertaining to do when asked by another to give them time to accomplish an important task such as fixing dinner or completing a telephone call.

l. How to –

- ❖ After developing solitary or shared leisure skills as above, practice with your child her or him engaging in these when asked as opposed to when chosen by them.

m. Use the strategies introduced above to arrange practice of appointed leisure.

For further information, visit our website at [www.aintmisbehavin.com](http://www.aintmisbehavin.com). Write to the author at [frankmarone@aintmisbehavin.com](mailto:frankmarone@aintmisbehavin.com).

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**OK/not OK RECORD MARONE 1977 RECORD PER 30 MINUTES ONE WEEK**

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CODES: X = OCCURRENCE OF TARGET BEHAVIOR O = NONOCCURRENCE  
 SPECIAL CODES:

Individual: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_