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WHAT APPEARS TO BE MISBEHAVIOR MIGHT JUST BE PART OF GROWING UP

Are you sometimes alarmed by your child's behavior? Have you ever stopped to consider that it may just be part of growing up?

Parents are frequently distressed by behaviors that are actually a normal part of their child's development. Unfortunately these "innocent acts" may be perceived by adults as misbehavior requiring disciplinary action. In reality the child was not deliberately misbehaving, but instead just acting appropriately for his or her age.

Examine the following situations. How would you respond? Consider how the child's age and development influences his or her behavior. Keep in mind that every child is unique and develops at their own rate.

At one-and-one-half years a child undresses in the back yard. Children this young do not have a fully-developed sense of modesty. They may also be excited by the challenge of removing their clothes and enjoy the freedom of nudity. At this age they do not entirely understand the rules they are expected to follow.

A 2-year old refuses to share toys and fights over the use of the toys. Two-year olds do not have a clear understanding of sharing and property rights. They may fear that if another child plays with their toy, he or she may get to take the toy home. Because of limited language skills, fighting becomes the means to get their own way.

A 3-year old denies breaking a dish she was not supposed to touch. At this age children do not really understand the meaning of "lying". Wishing something is true may make it seem real enough for a child to say something that is not true. In this situation the parent may need to point out the reality – the child was playing with the dish.

A child at 4 years of age yells and charges around the house. During the preschool years, children have a great deal of energy. They cannot sit still for long periods of time. Their need for movement should be channeled into constructive forms of behavior and at acceptable, as well as safe, locations in the home.

A 4-year old wets her pants while playing outside. Many parent's expectations of toilet training are not realistic. It is not until about 2 years of age that a child's nerves and muscles are developed fully enough to permit bowel and bladder control. Typically children do not master being dry at night until they are much older. Even at 4 years of age, play activities are so interesting that a child does not start for the bathroom in time. This is more a lack of judgment than disobedience.

A 7-year old child refused to eat a particular food or meal.

Children all ages will occasionally refuse to eat. Missing a meal will not hurt a child. Parents can encourage children to eat at least a small portion of the food. It may take presenting the food as many as fifteen times before a child will accept it.

Understanding the development of children is key to responding appropriately. Were you surprised that the behaviors mentioned were normal for the child's age? Are you able to decipher between normal behavior and actions that are a direct expression of disobedience?

To learn more talk to other parents that have children the same age as yours and check the resources at the library. WSU Cooperative Extension has publications available at <http://pubs.wsu.edu>.