

# Sometimes My Kid Drives Me Nuts!

## What Can I Do About It?

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Almost every parent is “driven up a wall” when their child behaves in certain ways. The behavior that “pushes a parent’s buttons” happens frequently — too frequently as far as most parents are concerned. And that is the problem.

Parents believe that certain acting out behavior of their child causes them to feel upset. It seems so obvious. The parent wasn’t upset before the child started behaving that way. The day had been going along pretty well. But when their youngster, once again, either became needy or stubborn or willful or started getting into everything or demanding attention, the child’s behavior “pushed my buttons” and caused the parent to get upset. “My kid is driving me crazy!” I wish she/he wouldn’t constantly act that way! Most mothers and fathers feel this way. Day in and day out, these feelings can become a heavy burden to bear.

But there is hope and practical solutions to this problem. The first step toward the rational solution of any problem is understanding the cause(s) of it. Why do certain behaviors of the child regularly get the parent irritated and upset?

To understand a parent’s reactions to their child, it is important to comprehend the developmental changes that take place when an adult becomes a parent. A parent experiences two interactive and interdependent ‘emotional childhoods’. The first emotional childhood occurred when she/he was young. The second happens later when she/he becomes a parent. This second emotional childhood emerges while a parent rears their child. When a parent interacts with their own child, she/he reencounters feelings that originated when she/he was growing up.

The following is a typical example of how this interactive process works with a parent. I will use a father for an example. When this father was a two, three or four year old boy, he felt the developmentally appropriate and powerful need to express his own will. When his parents told him to get dressed, he defiantly said “No!” When his mother poured his milk into a cup of her own choosing he said, “I don’t want milk in that cup!” At night he refused to brush his teeth or take a bath when told to do so. His parents felt exasperated and angry. When their son said “No!” they threatened him with punishment. Finally they spanked him, sent him to his room and took away his privileges. This pattern of parent-child interaction characterized this young boy’s life with his parents.

How did this young boy react to a pattern of being told what to do most of the time by his parents? He was relatively easy to care for during his first year of life. Then, it was easier for his parents to control and manage his life. He seemed more dependent and acquiesced to his parent’s wishes during his infancy.

About the time of his first birthday, things started to change. From about one-and-a-half or two years of age, this youngster felt hurt, pouted and cried when his play was interrupted or

when he was told what to do and what not to do. Then and at two, three and four years of age, he also began to scream or misbehave when his parents ignored or frustrated his desires to make up *his own* mind, explore *his own* interests, do things without help and on *his own*. His hurt developed into an anger. His parents continued to persuade and pressure their child to behave as they wanted. He threw temper tantrums and began to hit the pet cat. He even struck a peer friend in preschool. He occasionally broke things and threw objects out of anger.

He became more and more willful, at some times and won'tful at other times. Whether it was his willfulness or his won'tfulness, he failed to cooperate with his parents and frustrated them more and more. At these times, his parents became very upset with him. To the boy, his parents were towering and frightening figures when they yelled at him. Finally his father, out of desperation, grabbed and spanked him when the youngster's willfulness expressed itself in entrenched and stubborn behavior.

As hurt and angry as this young two to six year old boy was, he knew somewhere inside himself that he still needed his parents love and care. He felt very dependent and emotionally quite vulnerable. He also felt helpless, weak, and not able to defend himself against his parent's punishment. This young boy, like most young boys and girls before and since, felt compelled to make, within himself, a critical decision. To avoid the risk of losing his parent's love, he began to ignore his own hurt and anger and to bury those feelings within himself. In short, to keep his parent's love and protection, this youngster, metaphorically swallowed or repressed the emotional hurt and anger caused by his mother's and father's failure to adequately meet his need to become a more independent self. To help himself do this, the boy may also have started thinking that his parents were right, and that what he wanted must be bad and wrong. This critical decision very soon became an unconscious way of non-being for the child – an unconscious way that kept the child from his/her true being, true self and the process of self-confidently, and self-constructively becoming.

A number of powerful, interrelated pressures had been shaping this young boy's personality in the first six years of his life. He had, since birth, a normal and strong need for his parent's love, attention and approval. Since he was about one-and-a-half or two years of age he had developed a learned fear of his parent's continuously negative and/or punitive responses to his willful and more independent behaviors. He also had, as a result of his parent's reactions, developed a self-doubt about the validity of his own strongly felt need to become a more autonomous person. This self-doubt was the eventual outcome of an ongoing conflict between his felt need for his parent's love and acceptance, and their regular disapproval of certain interests and behaviors that meant a lot to him. All of the above needs and pressures worked, over time, to cause this boy (and most children raised like him) to keep his hurt and anger hidden. These hidden feelings of hurt and anger reappeared and were manifested in his behavior when he became a teenager. They became a part of the self in his adult life and when he became a parent.

When this boy grew up and had children of his own, that anger was still bubbling within him. When this father's child starts to seek satisfaction for the same developmentally normal, willful drives and needs for independence that the father had continuously frustrated by his parents when he was young, the father becomes upset and angry. His young child's normal

expression of willful, autonomous needs and behavior serve to emotionally threaten and attack the father.

The child's willful behavior is a catalyst that activates the father's repressed, childhood bubbling-hot hurt and anger. The father's "buttons are pushed" because he re-encounters from his own child's behavior, the same needs and behaviors that he, the father, had struggled painfully, with such conflict, and in vain, to achieve from his parents when he was a young boy. The father's anger and rage at the parents who punished his childhood normal willfulness emerges. His anger carefully pent up and hidden since he was young, now comes out of hiding and spills and spurts out against his own child.

But now things are different. The father is the big person with the authority, power and control that his parents once had over him. His child is small and vulnerable. The youngster cannot overpower the father's urge, finally, to express openly his long-repressed anger. "How dare my kid express his own will and seek satisfaction for the same developmentally normal need that was forever frustrated and unfulfilled when I was a youngster?!" The father then angrily blames his youngster for making him upset. The true cause of this father's angry reaction to the expression of his son's normal need is the failure of his parents who caused him pain by frustrating the same need in him when he was young.

### *The Introjected Voice*

Why does a parent regularly get so intensely angry at certain behaviors exhibited by their child? To answer this question it is necessary to understand what happens psychodynamically as children lose their childhood and grow older.

A parent must face and respond to a variety of powerful developmentally appropriate needs and drives expressed in their child's behavior. These needs and drives often interfere or conflict with the parent's own needs, values or lifestyle. When this happens a parent often adopts measures to stop or limit their child's behavior. The child is consistently made to act in ways that will please the parent.

When this is done throughout the early years of life, a young girl, for example, is placed in great conflict. Although unable to verbalize it, she feels that she must either give up her normal developmental self and behave like her parents want her to or continue to act as she has. This girl, like most children, will fight for herself and her needs at first. After awhile, however, she will be on guard. She will begin to control her behavior because she fears her parent's anger and the loss of their love. From the parent's point of view, their child has finally learned to act better when she stops "misbehaving". Life is calmer and more pleasant for the parents. Parents who *make* their child behave, erroneously believe they are good parents.

From what is known about human development, these on-going acts by parents can inflict lifelong damage. Out of fear, the child becomes ashamed of the behavior that reflects her normal needs and wants. Her parent's reactions have caused her to doubt the very legitimacy, value and worth of her own needs, desires and behavior. She struggles to resist her needs and keep from behaving badly. She seeks to insure her own security. The ongoing burden of this shame and

doubt combined with the threat of the loss of her parent's love cause her to begin to lose touch with her true self. However, she still has those powerful normal needs which cry out inside her to be met.

This conflict creates an anger and a fear in her. She is angry at not being allowed to express herself. She becomes frightened of being rejected by her parents if she experiences her own needs through her behavior. The powerful human emotions of anger, fear and shame surround and connect themselves to something equally as powerful – her normal developmental needs.

Imagine this young girl's emotional struggle! How is such a struggle to be resolved? To secure the love and protection of her parents, she begins to stop the behavior that bothered them. In doing so she joins forces with her parents. Reluctantly at first, she also starts to suspect and eventually even believe that her parents were right. This initiates a process called introjection. Introjection defends her from her own feelings. She embraces her parent's desire for her to control herself and identifies with their expectation of her. As a result, introjection resolves her feelings of self-doubt and shame about her normal behavior when she adopts, within herself, the attitudes and beliefs toward them that have been regularly voiced by her parents. This, she tells herself, will be better. A troubling personal conflict will end. She will no longer suffer arguments with her parents. And she will come into harmony with her parent's wishes, too. Thus, she will keep their love and insure that they won't leave her. What a nice 'trick' she unconsciously plays on herself. "After all, those big powerful people, my parents, are the providers, organizers and protectors of my world. I must be wrong! I should behave like they want me to." Over time, she convinces herself that her parents were right. As she matures, the more sense it seems to make to her.

Once she struck that bargain with herself and sided with her parents, she gave herself permission to ignore her own important needs and/or ignore her own angry feelings. This young girl, over time, adopts her parent's attitudes toward her own normal needs. Her parent's voice of disapproval eventually became her own internal voice. She would now become angry at or criticize herself. She begins to react to herself the very way that her parents had treated her. She starts to punish herself for expressing her normal needs. Although still in conflict, she strives hard to behave like her parents wanted her to behave. Over time, practice makes perfect.

The psychodynamic process that played itself out during this woman's life occurs with most people. It is present in most adults today. But do not be fooled! The anger and shame that occurred originally in childhood is very much still inside most adults. It is buried in the unconscious. Buried with the anger is also the fear. Acting as an emotional callous and keeping adults from feeling the powerful fears and angers inside them is the introjected voice of their own parents. It has now become their own voice. Most adults have been practicing this voice for years. Now it governs them. They use it to keep their fears, angers and needs controlled and at bay. This powerfully driven, introjected voice protects adults from consciously feeling their fear and anger in day-to-day life. It is a cap holding down those powerful feelings.

This person then becomes a parent. Their child's behavior eventually expresses the same developmentally normal needs that were consistently frustrated in the parent when the parent

was young. Like lava from an erupting volcano, the long-hidden emotional pain of childhood roars to the surface: “How dare my child seek need satisfaction where I was denied it!” The child’s behavior becomes a catalyst. It penetrates the unconscious emotional callous that parents have built up over the years to protect themselves from feeling the hurt, fear and anger caused by their own parents. The child’s behavior threatens the protective strength and defense provided by her introjected voice from her parents. This voice has for years hidden the pain she suffered from her mother when a child. The cap blows off. And the anger that the parent has worked so hard to control, in so many ways for so many years, spurts out against her child.

### *Transforming Defenses: What Other Parents Tried That Worked For Them*

A parent’s most powerful resource is an understanding of the true cause of their anger. This understanding can be used in several ways to deflect the anger from being expressed at the child. Take yourself briefly into another room away from your child and close the door. Say out loud: “I’m angry!! But my anger comes from the fact that when, as a child, I sought some satisfaction for the same need my child is now manifesting, I never got it. My parents never met that need. And that is the anger I’m feeling now. *The real source of my anger is in my childhood. It is not my own child.*” Make this statement to yourself and to other trusted adults.

Some parents have found that they can even get a bit of fun from making their statement into a rhyme or a song expressed out loud. The point is to acknowledge the true source of the anger to yourself. In so doing, a parent releases the energy of the anger in an active and creative way that brings some personal pleasure. The rhyme or song can help transform the hostile feelings. Anger can evolve into inventive fun for the parent.

If you find that your anger is too intense, give yourself a time out. Make arrangements to get help from nearby and readily accessible friends, relatives and/or other parents. Be certain you can obtain the support, understanding and presence of one of them when you need it. At least be sure they understand your need to express your feelings and insight over the telephone.

Some parents have made arrangements of mutual support like described above with another parent who lives nearby. The other parent and their child could be with your child while you go out for a vigorous walk or run. During the walk it is important to say out loud that your feeling of anger represents your own childhood needs still crying to be met inside you. The anger is *not* caused by your child.

There is another approach that parents have used to handle their anger. Use your knowledge of the true cause of your anger actively to make yourself pause. Stop what you are doing. Step back. Take a deep breath. Becalm yourself. After you are calm, identify with your child’s expressed needs. Feel inside yourself the need your youngster is expressing. Feel it as your own need. In your heart and imagination pretend your child is you as a child. Let your parenting behavior be carried out as if you are meeting *your own felt needs*. Have this attitude when you go to satisfy the expressed need of your child. For example, your child is crying for attention and love. In your imagination become your child. Go and cuddle with him/her. As you cuddle with and talk to your child, let warm feelings from the cuddling of your child sink into you as your youngster holds onto you or nestles into you. Let yourself, as parent, now feel

the love you have always wanted but were denied. By identifying with your child's needs and meeting them, as if they were your own, your anger can lessen and be replaced with love and an advocacy for your child's needs as well as your own.

Sometimes parents do this unconsciously. For example, when she was a preschool-aged child, a mother was always prohibited from getting dirty and not allowed to make a mess playing in her room with her toys. She always had to have her room neat and tidy. She was not allowed to dirty her little skirt and the patent leather shoes that her mother made her wear every day. If she did, she was severely punished. This little girl grew up and had a daughter of her own. When the daughter became two and three years of age, this mother began to notice something about her own maternal behavior. When she walked down the hall to clean up her daughter's room, the closer she came to the room, the harder it seemed to walk there. The mother described it by saying that as she walked down the hall toward her daughter's room to clean it up, she felt heavier and heavier – as if imaginary weights were being put upon her. She felt a pressure pushing against her chest. It pushed against the direction of her strides. The pressure became harder and harder as she walked closer and closer to her daughter's room. This mother had converted her own anger at having to be excessively clean and neat as a child into an identification with her daughter's need to make some disorder while playing.

If you try the ideas and none of them seem to work well or to endure, psychotherapy is a worthwhile avenue to explore. If you realize that angry feelings are in control of you as a person or parent and make your childrearing harsh, psychotherapy can reduce the power of these painful feelings. Psychotherapy can enable you to use the above strategies more successfully. Therapy can reduce and/or eliminate your anger. It can help you make life better for yourself, as a person, and a parent. Therapy can greatly improve your child-rearing efforts.

The psychosocial dynamics described in this paper are derived from and developed in more complete detail in *For Your Own Good*(1983) by Alice Miller. Published by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. The psychohistorical dynamics, presenting their social ramifications in various societies throughout history, are presented in *The History of Childhood*(1974) edited by Lloyd deMause and published by Atcom, Inc. The introduction written by deMause is especially worth reading.