

My kid sometimes drives me nuts! What can I do about it?

By Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph. D.

Parents can become "driven up a wall" when their young child behaves in certain ways. Their young child's "mis-behavior" happens frequently - too frequently, as far as they are concerned. And that is the problem.

It seems so obvious. The mother or father wasn't upset before the child started mis-behaving. The day had been going pretty well. But when their youngster became needy, stubborn or willful, or "started getting into everything", demanding attention, the child's behavior "pushed buttons" and caused the parent to get upset. "My kid is driving me crazy! I wish he wouldn't act that way!" Many mothers and fathers feel this way from time to time. Day in and day out, however, these feelings can become very irritating. But there are reasons for this problem.

The first step toward the thoughtful solution of any child's behavioral problem is understanding the cause(s) of it. Why do certain behaviors of a child often get a 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. Most parents experience two related and interdependent "emotional childhoods". The first occurs when the parent is young. The second emerges when the parent is rearing their own child. When a parent interacts with their own child, that adult encounters feelings which originated when the parent was a youngster. The following is an example of this process. I will use a father for an example.

When a young child, he enjoyed the attention, affection and loving care of his parents. During his first years of life, he was relatively easy to care for. It was easier for his parents to control his life. They responded to their young child when he expressed needs for love, attention, rest, food, play and appropriate physical care-taking.

When this boy became two or three years old, however, he began to feel his developmentally normal needs to express his **own** interests, wants, likes and dislikes. Now, when his parent encouraged him to begin getting dressed, he sometimes said "No!". When his mother poured his milk into his cup, he declared, "I don't want my milk in **that** cup!" At night he might refuse to brush his teeth or take a bath when told to do so. His parents felt increasingly exasperated, frustrated, and even angry. When their son said "No!" they eventually raised their voices at him. Finally, they sent him to his room or took away some of his privileges. This pattern of childrearing control characterized the very young life of this future father.

From about two years of age, life began to change for this young father-to-be. He felt hurt. He pouted and cried when his parents interrupted his play or told him what to do and what not to do. At two, three and four years of age, he began to cry, scream or misbehave when his parents interfered with his desire to make up his own mind, explore his own intrinsic interests, or do things on his own without help. His frequent hurts began to express themselves as anger. His parents at first persuaded and then pressured him to behave as they thought best. Then he would throw temper tantrums and occasionally even broke things. Sometimes, out of anger, he threw objects. He began to hit his own pet cat. He even struck a friend in pre-school.

He became more and more willful at times, and more and more "won'tful" at other times. Whether it was his willfulness or his "won'tfulness", he continued to be a frustration and a challenge to his parents. At those times, his parents became very upset. To the boy, when his parents yelled at him, they were towering and frightening figures. When the youngster's willfulness expressed itself in entrenched and stubborn behavior, his father, out of desperation, would grab him and speak harshly to him.

As hurt and angry as this young boy became, he was aware that he still needed his parents' protection and care. He still wanted and needed their love and affection. He felt

dependent and very emotionally vulnerable. He felt helpless, small, and unable to defend himself against his parents' authority or anger. This young boy, like most young boys and girls before and since, was compelled to make a very difficult decision within himself. To escape his parents' anger and punishment and to avoid the risk of losing his parents' protection, love and care, he decided to hide from his own hurt and anger and to bury those feelings within himself. In short, to keep his parents' love and protection, this youngster decided to make an internally-kept peace with his parents. Metaphorically, he swallowed and repressed the intense negative emotions he felt toward his parents' failure to encourage his normal and persistent needs to become a more imaginative, lively, and independent self. He even began to wonder if their ideas about his behavior might be right. Could, he thought, what he so liked to do be bad and wrong? This decision became an unconscious "mental muscle" which the boy used to help himself retreat from his parent-enforced disappointment at not letting him develop his own sense of self and independence.

A number of interrelated pressures had been shaping this young boy's personality. He had, since birth, a normal need for his parents' consistent love, protection, attention and approval. Since he was two years of age he had developed a fear of his parents' negative and punitive responses to his own independent ideas, yearnings and behaviors. Also, as a result of his parents' reactions, he had developed a lingering doubt in the validity and worth of his **own** strongly-felt needs to become a more autonomous person. This doubt was the outcome of an increasing conflict between his dependence on his parents' care and acceptance, and their regular disapproval of the expressions of his youthful interests and the persistent behaviors which were so important to him. The above pressures worked, over time, to cause this developing boy (and most children raised like him) to keep his hurt and doubt hidden in his unconscious. These hidden feelings of hurt, anger and doubt lived on as a significant, unconscious part of him when an adolescent and throughout his adult life, emerging when he became a parent.

This adolescent grew up and became a father. When this father's two-year-old started to seek satisfaction for the normal needs for autonomy and independence, the father became upset. His child's expression of willful, autonomous needs and behaviors served to remind the father of the silent history of his own painful childhood experiences -- experiences which had been buried in this father's unconscious for decades. Now, however, his child's willful behavior became a catalyst which activated the father's repressed childhood feelings. The father's "buttons were pushed". He re-encountered his own childhood – his own emotionally intense and in vain struggle to achieve independence and approval when he was a young boy. Now the buried anger of this grown-up father, carefully pent up and hidden for many years, bursts out of hiding to challenge his own youngster.

This psychodynamic process which played itself out during this father's life occurs with most people. It is present in most adults today. The anger and shame that occurred originally in childhood is very much still alive most adults. It is buried in the unconscious. Buried with the anger is also the fear. Keeping adults from feeling the powerful fears and angers inside them is the voice of their own parents. It has now become **their** voice. Most adults have been practicing that voice for years. It now governs them. It keeps their fears, angers and needs controlled and at bay. It is a cap holding down uncomfortable feelings of pain born in childhood. When this person becomes a parent, their child's behavior eventually expresses similar developmentally normal needs that were frustrated when the parent was young.

*The psychosocial dynamics described in this paper are described more fully in **For Your Own Good** (1983), written by Alice Miller and published by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. The psychohistorical dynamics and 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 to this book, written by deMause, is especially worth reading.*