Parenting: A Common Language for a Common Goal

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Abstract

Parenting styles and methods have varied over time and continue to do so as our society becomes more complex. As researchers learn more about children and how they respond to discipline, it becomes more important than ever to find a common language to discuss discipline. Children have a tendency to subscribe to one of four goals of misbehavior, and adults have a distinct way of reacting to each of the goals. In an effort to find a common ground in parenting, this paper will outline the four goals; attention, power, revenge, and display of inadequacy. It will also describe how to recognize and respond to the goals in a successful manner.
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Parents have struggled with disciplining children for many years. From generation to generation, the methods of discipline have varied just as much as people vary. Every few years, another theory or technique comes into play as the new solution to subdue the troublesome behaviors of children. Parents have latched on to these popular beliefs hoping they will work for their children. Parents continue to try new and different theories and techniques as they attempt to raise their children to be intelligent, well-rounded and socially responsible adults. Theories and techniques that become part of pop-culture will inevitably work for some children, but others may respond to something different. Parents who have tried several of these trendy theories and techniques may begin to feel hopeless or become discouraged if they are not successful (Robertson & Patterson, 1979).

As parents attempt new techniques, the old ways become less effective. Rudolf Dreikurs has hypothesized that the changes in technology are somewhat to blame. As technology gets more sophisticated, parenting styles must also get more sophisticated in order to remain effective. For example, it has been said that the authoritative parenting style is becoming obsolete. Parenting styles can remain effective if the techniques within the style are evolving along with technology (Carmack & Carmack, 1994; Robertson & Patterson, 1979).

The implementation of various theories and techniques has led to the identification of differing parenting styles. Three major parenting styles have been commonly referred to; Authoritarian, Permissive, and Authoritative. Diana Baumrind has been credited with naming these parenting styles, along with a fourth parenting style.

The Authoritarian parental style attempts to shape, control and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct. The Authoritarian parent values obedience and favors punitive and forceful measures in the attempt to curb self-will if those beliefs are in conflict with the parents’ views of what is right. Authoritarian parents believe their children should accept the parents’ word for what is right and give little room for the child to give input (Baumrind, 1966; Hillman & Perry, 1975).

The Permissive parenting style strives to use non-punitive measures and attempts to be accepting and affirmative towards the child’s impulses, desires and behaviors. The Permissive parent makes few demands of responsibility on the child and uses reason and manipulation rather than overt power to guide the child. The Permissive parent views him or herself as a resource for the child and does not strive for the child to emulate their actions. Permissive parents allow their children the freedom to self-regulate and become involved in the family decision process. They will discuss openly with the child the family rules and policies, giving them an opportunity to share their opinions and be a part of decision-making processes (Baumrind, 1966; Hillman et al., 1975).

The third parenting style is the Authoritative parent. This is somewhat a combination of the two previously mentioned parenting styles. The Authoritative parent values both self-will and disciplined conformity. He or she attempts to direct the behavior of the child by rationalizing their discipline tactics. A parent that uses the Authoritative
style of parenting encourages the child to participate in discussions surrounding family policy and rules by allowing the child to verbally give and receive opinions and feedback. The Authoritative parent also stands firm when the child and parent are in conflict regarding decisions but does not use punitive measures or become restrictive. The Authoritative parent affirms the child’s qualities and interests while setting future standards. The Authoritative parent uses reasoning, power and shaping through routine and reinforcement to achieve the desired outcome (Baumrind, 1966; Hillman et al., 1975).

On the opposite side of the parent-child dynamic are the child and his or her behavior. Rudolf Dreikurs stated that children strive to belong through socially constructive means, as long as they maintain their courage. When a child becomes discouraged, he or she begins to look for social acceptance and a sense of belonging through others (1964/1990). The child will attempt to find his place among others through acting on one of four “mistaken goals”. The four goals that have been identified are attention, power, revenge, and display of inadequacy. Through operating in one of the four goal areas, the child is trying to regain his courage and establish a sense of belonging (Carmack et al., 1994; Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1981; Dreikurs, 1964/1990; Kottman & Stiles, 1990).

In order to help manage the misbehaviors of the child, it is important for the parent to recognize the mistaken goal through which the child is attempting to gain their acceptance. In identifying the goal, the parent can effectively deal with the behavior the child is displaying, rather than reinforce it. Parents who do not realize which goal their child is subscribing to could inadvertently be reinforcing the undesirable behavior. The
child might end up feeling more discouraged and less significant in their parents’ world (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Dreikurs, 1964/1990).

This paper will describe in detail the four goals of attention, power, revenge and display of inadequacy. It will also explain the basic human goal, which is the desire to belong. A discussion of behavior patterns associated with the four goals will be given. Readers will be guided through the identification process in an effort to detail effective methods of discipline. These methods are designed to work within the framework of the four goals of misbehavior rather than against them. The identification process will outline common reactions to the behaviors displayed through each of the four goals. There are also suggestions for more effective responses in which the parents will assist the child to use the goals in a useful manner.

The Desire to Belong

Humans have an innate sense of belonging. Alfred Adler believed that humans were organically inclined to seek affection from others through social interest. He observed that children seek this through the attention of adults from birth on. The child seeks affection through others and not from within. Adler also stated that social interest and the desire to gain affection remains throughout the life cycle and is continuously expanding (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964; Mullis, Kern, & Curlette, 1987).

Social interest has been described as a “community feeling”, indicating that one acts on behalf of the community in order to obtain inner satisfaction. It provides the individual with a feeling of belonging to others. The goal is to contribute to the community in order to belong and strive to be the best. This concept has also been described as a striving for completion (Bettner & Lew, 2000; Oberst & Stewart, 2003).
Maslow theorized that a sense of belongingness is necessary for human survival. In his hierarchy of needs, the third tier is a need to belong and to be loved. He described this tier as the need for people to feel that they are a part of a group that is larger and more powerful than each individual. They must find meaning through belonging by simultaneously getting along with others and making a contribution to the group (Oberst et al., 2003).

Children are not as mature in their reasoning skills as adults and will use their behaviors to gain a sense of belonging (Kottman, 1999). At times, a child will attempt to find his or her acceptance by using negative behaviors. Parents may perceive this as misbehavior when it might simply be the immaturity of the child’s skill to use reasoning and logic to explain his or her feelings. The primary goal of a child’s behavior is to find a sense of significance and belonging. Children sometimes have mistaken beliefs about their self-worth that lead them to misbehave. The misbehavior typically falls into one of four categories that make up the goals of misbehavior. The four goals of misbehavior are attention, power, revenge and assumed inadequacy (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1971; Hillman et al., 1975; Mullis, 1987; Nelsen, 1981/1996).

All behavior has a purpose. Most adults do not understand that a child’s behavior is sending a message (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Dreikurs et al., 1971; Hillman et al., 1975). When the parents attempt to correct a child’s misbehavior they risk inadvertently reinforcing the behavior. It is crucial for adults, and especially parents, to understand the reason behind the child’s behavior if they wish to be successful in extinguishing the behavior rather than reinforcing it (Dreikurs, 1972a; Dinkmeyer, 1961).
The Four Goals of Misbehavior

Children operate in one of four mistaken goal areas as a result of flawed beliefs regarding their self-worth. Misbehavior is generally the result of a highly discouraged child. If children perceive that they have no significance, they will begin to strive for a sense of belonging according to their mistaken belief system. The child will develop the belief system whether or not the belief is true. The child will believe the mistaken assumptions to be true because events in his or her life have reinforced this belief. The child’s mistaken assumptions are the driving force behind which behaviors are displayed (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Dreikurs et al., 1971; Pepper, 1977).

Two children may use the same behavior to achieve significance, but the belief that is driving the behavior could be very different. The mistaken belief of the child will determine which of the four goals is used to achieve significance (Hillman et al., 1975; Nelsen, 1981/1996).

The mistaken belief behind the goal of attention is “I feel a sense of belonging and significance only if I receive constant attention and keep you busy with me.” Children who operate on the goal of power to gain significance have the mistaken assumption “I feel a sense of belonging and significance only if I am the boss and do what I want to do.” The goal of revenge is driven by the mistaken belief “I feel hurt because I do not have a sense of belonging and significance, so I have a right to hurt others as I have been hurt.” The final goal of misbehavior, a display of inadequacy, operates on the belief “I do not feel it is possible for me to belong and have significance, so I will give up and hope that people will leave me alone” (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Pepper, 1977).
It is very important for parents and other significant adults in a child’s life to realize that children are not using the misbehavior simply to misbehave, but that there are mistaken beliefs about the child’s self-worth powering the behaviors. The child uses the behavior as a way to gain that self-worth back. If a parent understands that the behavior is simply due to the child feeling discouraged and his or her desire to gain back their significance, they will be more effective in their methods to correct the undesirable behavior (Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 1998). Encouragement is the most important tool a parent or significant adult can have when trying to negate these mistaken assumptions in the child. Once a parent or significant adult can identify the statement of worth the child is adhering to, they can begin to encourage the child to use positive means by which to gain significance (Bettner et al., 2000; Dinkmeyer, 1961; Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Nelsen, 1981/1996).

Although it is possible to deal with each of these goals effectively, at any point, it would be more beneficial to start working to correct the misbehavior early on. Dreikurs hypothesized that the goals are progressive and, if one goal is not met the child will move on to the next goal to try and achieve significance. The first goal of misbehavior is attention. If the child feels unsuccessful in gaining attention he or she will proceed to the next goal of power in an effort to feel significant; and so on (Dreikurs et al., 1971; Dreikurs, 1972a).

When parents become engaged in a power struggle the child has won. However, if parents refuse to get involved in the power struggle, the child becomes upset and attempts retaliation by moving into the third goal which is revenge. A child operating on revenge can become violent and destructive. His or her goal is to make others miserable and to
prove the mistaken assumption that “nobody likes me” (Dreikurs et al., 1971; Dreikurs, 1972a).

The final goal of misbehavior, a display of inadequacy, commonly follows revenge. A child could move into a display of inadequacy at any time if he or she feels the efforts of the original goal were unsuccessful. The discouragement of failing to gain significance in previous attempts allows the child to feel they will never have that significance. A child displaying this inadequacy is the most discouraged relative to the other three goals of misbehavior. Children displaying inadequacy have developed a mistaken assumption of “I do not belong and will not belong” and they believe it. The following paragraphs will break down each of the goals and their associated beliefs even further (Dreikurs et al., 1971; Dreikurs, 1972a).

Attention

Children operating on the goal of attention have the belief that they are significant only when they are being noticed (Kottman et al., 1990). This is the goal under which most young children operate. Young children have very few opportunities to make useful contributions and establish a social status within the family. This is especially true if the young child has older siblings who are able to take on some of the family responsibilities. This leaves fewer responsibilities for the younger child and fewer opportunities for him or her to make significant contributions (Dinkmeyer et al., 1981; Dreikurs, 1972a).

The attention seeking child will try to use constructive means to achieve their acceptance as long as it is working. The child who operates under the goal of attention will vie for the attention by non-constructive means if the need is not satisfied constructively. This child strives for attention to the extent that he or she would rather fall
victim to physical punishment than be ignored (Dreikurs, 1972a). These children feel that as long as they can keep others busy with them they are significant. A child using the goal of attention is usually quite successful in keeping the attention on them once they have it (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973). Attention-seeking children have to be successful because they feel unloved if they are not getting the attention. This interpretation stems from the mistaken beliefs that are driving the child to operate on the goal of attention (Nelsen et al., 1998)

It is important for children to gain attention from significant adults in their lives. However, giving children too much attention may be part of the problem leading to the misbehavior. If a child receives excessive amounts of attention and the attention is taken away even for a short time, the child may begin to feel neglected and insignificant. He or she will then attempt to gain the attention back as quickly as possible. A parent who gives large amounts of attention to his or her child may end up seeing undesirable behaviors when everyday interruptions occur (Nelsen et al., 1998; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973).

*Power*

When a child is unsuccessful in gaining social acceptance through attention seeking behaviors, he or she may move into the second goal of misbehavior, power. Children watch adults use power to solve problems and gain social status (Dreikurs, 1972b). Children who attempt to gain a sense of belonging through the use of power have the mistaken assumption that they are significant only when they are in control or if they do not allow others to be in control (Nelsen, 1981/1996; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973). The children who operate on the mistaken goal of power have seen that power brings
significance to adults and they see it as a way that they can also achieve significance (Dreikurs, 1972b).

Children can use the mistaken goal of power in one of two ways; they can attempt to control the adult or they simply do not allow the adult to have control. These children will execute their goal by purposefully doing what they are not supposed to do, and by not doing things they have been asked to do (Dreikurs, 1972b). In the parent’s attempt to correct the behavior of the child, he or she will commonly reinforce it by engaging in a power struggle. The danger in engaging a child in a power struggle is that the next time the child will engage more intensely. Another danger of engaging in a power struggle is that the child may become extremely discouraged and view the parent’s attempt to hold firm in the quest for power as an indication that the parent does not love him or her anymore (Dreikurs, 1972a; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973).

The behaviors displayed by a child attempting to gain power are much more intense than that of the attention-seeking child. Children who use power are more emotionally invested in the attempt to gain significance. They are much more strong-willed and are now at a higher level of discouragement as a result of not gaining their significance through attention. The parent also becomes discouraged because the child is now exhibiting behaviors that deliberately go against the wish of the parent. Any attempt the parent makes to distinguish the behaviors may actually intensify the situation (Dreikurs, 1972a).

Revenge

Children who become discouraged as a result of futile attempts to gain significance through power might turn to the third goal of misbehavior, revenge. These
children develop the belief that they are unlovable and the only way they can justify their feelings of hurt is through hurting others. Children acting out in revenge think it is impossible for others to like them and will provoke others to ensure they are right.

Children who use the mistaken goal of revenge tend to display the most violent behaviors among the four goals of misbehavior. Power and force no longer mean anything to them and they are only out to prove they are unlikable (Bettner et al., 2000; Dreikurs, 1972a).

Children who use the mistaken goal of revenge to gain significance are deeply discouraged and hurt. They feel hurt because they do not have a sense of belonging. These children believe they have a right to hurt others, as they have been hurt. They view revenge as a way to find some sort of satisfaction. These children think that if they do not belong or have significance at least they will have satisfaction in hurting someone else as they have been hurt (Nelsen, 1981/1996).

*Display of Inadequacy*

The last of the four goals is a display of inadequacy. When a child uses this goal, he or she is highly discouraged and has all but given up on gaining significance and a sense of belonging. The behaviors of the child who is displaying inadequacy are the least disruptive of all the goals. The behaviors may be overlooked or the child may become invisible to an extent. The parents often feel as hopeless as the child. The parents do things for the children that they could easily do on their own. These children have successfully convinced others that they are not capable (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Dreikurs suggests that children who are using a display of inadequacy are completely discouraged. They no longer try to get others in their service. They do not attempt anything that could cause further embarrassment due to failure. This child can
sometimes appear to be slower academically but, in reality, the child may use this to his or her advantage so that others do not expect anything from them. Children using a display of inadequacy feel that there is no chance to be successful, whether they use useful or useless means. The child has developed the mistaken belief of, “If I do anything, I will fail and you will see how useless I am” (Dreikurs, 1990; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973).

Children who display inadequacy have been proven inadequate by their environment time and time again. They do not simply begin to feel worthless and hopeless without provocation. The child has failed several times while making attempts to achieve significance. Experience has shown them that they will never be successful and the only way to avoid further embarrassment or hurt is to avoid further attempts. The behaviors demonstrated through a display of inadequacy can be easily mistaken for any of the other three goals so it is important to recognize the child’s hopeless feelings behind the behaviors (Dreikurs, 1972b; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973).

Behavior Patterns

Dreikurs hypothesized that there were particular behavior patterns that correlate with the goals of misbehavior. A child is either active or passive and uses either constructive or destructive methods to obtain their goal. Whether a child is active or passive depends on the level of discouragement the child feels. A highly discouraged child will always be more passive in his or her efforts. Children tend to use more constructive methods as long as they have some sense of belonging. Children begin to use destructive methods when they feel their sense of belonging is being threatened. The combination of these factors reveals four specific behavior patterns: active-constructive,
active-destructive, passive-constructive and passive-destructive (Dreikurs, 1968; Dreikurs, 1972b; Mullis et al., 1987; Pepper, 1977).

**Active-Constructive**

These four behavior patterns correlate with the four goals of misbehavior. The goal of attention can be achieved through any of the four behavior patterns; however, the active-constructive model is unique to the goal of attention. The active-constructive pattern of behavior finds a child actively behaving in a constructive manner. A child using this behavior pattern appears to conform and cooperate. These children display positive behaviors although they are very evident in their attention-seeking efforts. Adults might easily misinterpret the child’s behavior as desirable if they do not recognize the child’s goal behind the behavior. Children using the active-constructive behavior pattern can quickly switch to the active-destructive pattern of behavior if their goal of attention is not met (Dreikurs, 1962; Dreikurs, 1972b; Pepper, 1977).

**Active-Destructive**

The child will then begin to actively use destructive methods to gain attention. The active-destructive model may also be seen in the goals of power and revenge. When the parent identifies that their child is using active-destructive means to achieve their goal, they may still be uncertain of the goal their child is trying to achieve. A child who uses this method and is trying to achieve attention will most likely not be displaying violent behaviors. If the parent gives attention and the behavior ceases it is clear that the child has achieved his or her goal (Dreikurs, 1962; Dreikurs, 1972b; Pepper, 1977).

A child who is using active-destructive means to achieve power will not cease the behavior after receiving attention. The child whose goal is power wants to be in control
and will likely continue the behavior until the parent gives in or gives up. Revenge is similar to power in that the child wants to be in control. If a child is using active-destructive methods to achieve revenge he or she will likely engage in behaviors that are deliberate and hurtful. The behaviors of a child using power or revenge are very similar. The goals of power and revenge both use active means to achieve the desired outcome. The behaviors are achieved through destructive measures rather than constructive. Children whose goal of misbehavior is revenge or power tend to have more violent behaviors than children whose goal is attention or a display of inadequacy (Dreikurs, 1962; Dreikurs, 1972b; Pepper, 1977).

**Passive-Constructive**

The next behavior pattern identified by Dreikurs is the passive-constructive method. This behavior pattern is also unique to the goal of attention. The child attempts to gain attention through conformity. These children tend to be on their best behavior and also blend in with the crowd. In this regard, they are often overlooked for their efforts due to the passivity of their behaviors. The child needs help from others to build up his or her self-confidence but does not display discouraged behaviors. It is important for a parent or caregiver to identify that the child is discouraged before the child moves into the final behavior pattern of passive-destructive (Dreikurs, 1962; Dreikurs, 1972b; Pepper, 1977).

**Passive-Destructive**

The final behavior pattern is passive-destructive and is only displayed when a child is using the goal of display of inadequacy. Naturally, these children are the most discouraged so they use passive means to achieve their goal. The destructive portion of this behavior pattern can be seen in these children through avoidance. They no longer
conform and blend in, but their discouragement can be seen through their passivity and
avoidance of tasks that could help build self-confidence (Dreikurs, 1962; Dreikurs,
1972b; Pepper, 1977).

Identifying the Goal

In order to be effective in stamping out unwanted behaviors, a parent or
significant adult must identify the goal a child is trying to achieve with the behavior. If
the correct goal is not identified, the behavior could be reinforced rather than
extinguished. For example, if a child is trying to achieve the goal of attention through
undesirable behaviors and the parent continues to ask the child to stop, the child is getting
attention for the behavior. The child gets the attention they desire and continues to
engage in the behavior after a brief cessation. As long as the parent continues to give
attention for the behavior they will continue to reinforce it (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973;
Kottman, 1999; Pepper, 1977).

Some behaviors can be found in any of the four goals. This is why the belief
behind the behavior is a key component in identifying the goal on which the child is
operating. A behavior such as not doing what is asked of the child could be common to
all of the goals although the belief behind the behavior may be different (Nelsen,
1981/1996). The following will illustrate this example of a child in noncompliance as it
pertains to each of the four goals of misbehavior.

Children who are trying to achieve attention may find that if they continue to not
do what is asked of them the parent will give them attention in an attempt to gain
compliance from the child. Another child may use the same behavior to gain power. The
adult might ask the child to do a task and the child will not comply as a way to gain
significance through control. Another child may have been hurt by an adult engaging in a power struggle and strive to get even by non-compliance. The fourth child may not be doing what is asked as a way to display that he or she is inadequate and incapable of completing the task.

There are a few ways that parents and other significant adults can help identify the goal their child is using. Parents and caregivers can help identify the goal of the child when they pay attention to their own emotions in response to the child’s behavior. The parent does not need to change their emotional response. They must acknowledge their emotions and be honest with themselves about which emotion was provoked. This will serve as a valuable guide for the adult when identifying the goal of the child. Adults have a typical response to behaviors that are guided by their emotions. The child will respond in a specific way to the reaction of the adult that is evoked by their emotional response as well (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Nelsen et al, 1998; Pepper, 1977).

It is important to note these response patterns and become familiar with them in order to become successful in identifying the goal of the child and help effectively manage unwanted behaviors. If parents and caregivers can learn how to recognize their own emotional response to a child’s behavior it will help them to identify the goal of the behavior. The parent or caregiver can then implement new responses that could be more effective. As the adult becomes more effective at recognizing his or her own emotional response to the child’s behavior, he or she will be able to identify the goal of the behavior more quickly (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Nelsen, 1981/1996). The following paragraphs will outline the typical responses and feelings associated with each of the goals in order to give perspective on how to identify which of the goals a child is using. Figure 1
illustrates these typical patterns in an easy to use chart (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, Jr., 1979).

Attention

The first goal of misbehavior is that of attention. The child feels significant and a sense of belonging only when he or she is receiving attention. When a child is displaying behaviors within the mistaken goal of attention, a parent feels the emotional response of annoyance, irritation, worry or guilt. The emotions of the parents lead them to react to the misbehavior in a specific way (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al, 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al, 1998).

The most common reaction of a parent or significant adult responding to a child seeking attention is to ask the child repeatedly to stop the behavior. Other responses include coaxing, reminding and doing things for the child that they are capable of doing for themselves. In all these instances the child is continuing to receive attention for the misbehavior. He or she will usually comply at least for a short amount of time. However, once the child realizes that he or she is no longer receiving attention for the behavior, he or she will begin the same or another behavior to gain it back. As long as the behavior is being reinforced the child will continue to use attention-seeking behaviors (Carlson, Watts, and Maniaci, 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; Nelsen, 1981/1996).

It is easy to see how an irritated parent can get caught in a cycle or behaviors and interactions with this child. The parent’s emotions are driving them to calm the child’s need for attention. In turn, the child is being reinforced for their misbehavior by gaining the attention. This is why the child briefly stops the behavior before resuming the same or
another behavior. As long as the child continues to be reinforced with attention from the
parent or caregiver they will be locked in this cycle (Dreikurs, 1972a, 1972b; Nelsen,

Children who feel they are not getting their needs met for attention might move
into the next mistaken goal of power. The cycle has already set the stage for parent and
child to get locked into circular behavior patterns. The parent may not realize that the
child has moved onto the goal of power unless they can recognize their change in
emotional reaction to the child’s behavior (Dreikurs, 1972a, 1972b; Nelsen, 1981/1996).

Power

With the goal of power, an adult’s emotional reaction to a child’s behavior could
be feeling provoked, challenged, threatened or defeated. If a child has been engaging in
the goal of attention for a period of time before quickly moving into the goal of power, it
is not surprising that a parent might be feeling these emotions. A typical response to these
emotions can be for the adult to want to prove his or her power over the child.
Unfortunately, if power is the goal of the child as well, the adult and child may become
engaged in a power struggle (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National

Another common response is for the adult to give in to the child. Although this
may bring a temporary stop to the behavior, a child is now reinforced in thinking that he
or she is more powerful than the adult. This can be a problem for parents and caregivers
who are dealing with the behaviors of a child who is using power. The child now believes
that he or she is more powerful than the adult. The next time the child misbehaves the
behaviors will be intensified. Not only will the behaviors be intensified, but the child now
has the belief that he or she has the power in the parent-child relationship. The child will
fight harder to keep the power in order to maintain his or her feelings of significance
(Carlson et al., 2006; Dreikurs, 1972a, 1972b; National Network for Child Care, 1996;

Children who feel their sense of belonging slipping away in the goal of power will
try to hang on to it at all costs. When a parent or caregiver fights back and is successful,
these children will feel their significance is being threatened. When the significance of
these children is threatened, they will likely move into the third goal to achieve
significance, which is revenge. With the goal of revenge, children will retaliate because
they now feel the only way to be significant is to hurt others as they have been hurt
(Dinkmeyer et al. 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; Dreikurs, 1972a, 1972b; Nelsen,

Revenge

Children operating on the goal of revenge often display the most violent behaviors
among the goals of misbehavior. Typical emotional responses evoked from parents in
response to a child using the goal of revenge are feeling hurt, disappointed, disbelief or
disgust. Naturally, the parent responds to these emotions by retaliating against the
behavior in an effort to get even or by thinking “How could you do this to me?” This is a
clear example of how the parent’s emotions are driving his or her response to the
behavior. It is human nature to feel hurt by someone seeking revenge. Emotions are even
stronger when it is a child seeking revenge on his or her parent (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973;
Dinkmeyer, 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Nelsen et
al, 1998).
Children who act out in revenge continue to modify and intensify their behavior in an effort to continue hurting others. It is important to remember the mistaken beliefs that are fueling children who use the goal of revenge. They feel their only way to have significance in the world is by hurting others as they have been hurt (Carlson et al., 2006; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Nelsen et al., 1998). They have not been successful in gaining a sense of belonging through attention or power and they no longer respond to power or force (Dreikurs, 1972a).

A child who uses revenge might move on to the final goal of misbehavior which is a display of inadequacy if he or she feels all hope is lost for gaining a sense of belonging. After using revenge for a period of time, the child may begin to believe that he or she will never have significance again. If this happens, these children become deeply discouraged to the point that their goal is simply to prove how useless and incapable they are (Dreikurs, 1972a, 1972b).

Display of Inadequacy

With the final goal of misbehavior, the parent or caregiver’s emotions somewhat mirror that of the child. A child feels hopeless and inadequate, and must convince others that he or she is helpless. The parent’s emotional response to a child behaving with a goal to display his or her inadequacy include feelings of despair, hopelessness, helplessness and his or her own inadequacy as a parent (National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Nelsen, 1998).

The parent’s feelings of despair and helplessness drive him or her to give up on getting the child to comply. The parent does things for the child that they are capable of doing themselves because the parent feels hopeless in his or her efforts to encourage the
child to even make an attempt. The behaviors displayed by children who believe they are inadequate are the least violent of the four goals. These children have given up all hope that they will have significance and are convinced no one could ever love them. The behaviors of the child are very passive and might be hard to recognize as misbehavior. If parents are able to recognize their own emotions when caring for children who operate on the goal to display inadequacy, they will recognize the behaviors of the children for what they are and resist the common response of doing for the children that which they are capable of doing for themselves (Carlson et al., 2006; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Nelsen et al, 1998).

**Responding to the Goal**

While it is important for adults to recognize their own emotional response to a child’s behavior in order to help identify the goal of the child, it is also important for parents to be aware of their common reactions to the behaviors of each of the goals. As it has been mentioned several times, a child’s behaviors can be reinforced if a parent or caregiver does not recognize the belief behind the behavior (Nelsen et al, 1998).

It can be difficult at first for an adult to modify his or her instinctive response to a child’s behavior. After all, the parent’s emotions are what trigger the response. This is just another step in enhancing the parent’s behavior management skills. An emotional response to a behavior is not always the most effective. In fact, it can be quite ineffective since there is no logic or reasoning guiding it (Nelsen, 1981/1996).

Once adults are able to recognize their emotions, they can easily identify the goal of misbehavior in which the child is engaging. This will allow the adult to recognize his or her instinctive response before following through with it. The parent or significant
adult can now begin to implement new techniques to help them promote positive behavior in their children. The adult is able to react with a logical response that correlates with the mistaken belief of the child in an effort to contradict what the child believes to be true (Hillman et al., 1975; Nelsen et al, 1998; Pepper, 1977).

As seen in Figure 1, each of the four goals of misbehavior has distinct emotions that are emitted from the significant adult. These emotions emit typical response patterns from the adult attempting to correct the misbehavior and the child’s response to the adult’s action. The driving force behind each of the goals is the mistaken belief of the child. A logical response according to this belief is the only way to help a child act according to his or her goal in a useful way. Figure 1 also outlines proactive and empowering responses that will allow the child to feel significant, as well as help guide them towards more productive behaviors (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979, Nelsen et al 1998; Pepper, 1977). The emotionally guided responses, along with more effective logical responses, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Attention

The emotional response elicited in an adult who is dealing with a child who seeks the goal of attention is annoyance, irritation, worry or guilt. This emotional drive often leads the parent or caregiver to react to the child with gentle reminders or coaxing to stop the behavior. The parent will sometimes do things for the child that he or she can do for themselves out of frustration when the child is not in compliance (Nelsen et al 1982/1996). As long as children are receiving attention for their behaviors, they will have achieved their goal (Dreikurs, 1972a).
It is important again to remember the mistaken belief of children seeking attention is that they only belong and have significance when they are keeping others busy with them. A parent or caregiver can more effectively help children modify their behavior through active listening. A child that feels validated in his or her feelings is more likely to comply than one who is misunderstood (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al, 1998; Pepper, 1977).

Another way of responding logically to the mistaken belief of a child who has a goal of attention is to recognize his or her need for attention and compromise with the child. Nelsen et al. (1998) gives an example of this when a child is seeking attention in a waiting room. The mother recognizes the child’s need for attention and also states her own needs for sitting quietly. The mother asks her child for a compromise to read one book together and then they each read one quietly among themselves (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al., 1998; Pepper, 1977).

The parent or caregiver could also attempt to gain cooperation from the child and get him or her involved in a task that is useful. Getting children involved gives them attention for positive behaviors and also helps the adult lessen their emotional response to the situation. A reassuring hug to the child can help guide the process of cooperation. This also sends the message to the child that he or she is significant (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al, 1998; Pepper, 1977).

A typical behavior of a child seeking attention is for him or her to interrupt an adult conversation. It is important to convey the message to the child that he or she is
cared for while showing the child how to respect others’ needs for attention as well. A way to do this is to touch the child and continue the conversation while ignoring the interruption. The touch signifies to the child that the parent or caregiver recognizes the child’s need for attention but does not give in to the misbehavior of interrupting the adult conversation. The child feels significant even though the adult is not giving special service to the child by allowing the interruption. As with many of the response modifications, the parent or significant adult will need to exercise consistency. The adult must realize the child is learning the new response pattern as well (Carlson et al., 2006; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Pepper, 1977).

It is possible that some of the response modifications will work for several of the goals. Given that a child may use the same behavior to achieve any of the four goals this should come as no surprise. The underlying belief of the child is what determines the goal that he or she is using. Encouraging a child and verbalizing the adult’s love for the child is one response that will be discussed under each of the goal headings. Children who seek undue attention need encouragement and to hear that they are loved just as much as any other child. Giving encouragement to a child seeking attention might be to express faith and ability in the child to be successful in a task. The adult shows the child that he or she believes in the child (Nelsen et al, 1998). An encouraged child has no reason to misbehave, as Dreikurs hypothesized that misbehaving children are the product of feeling discouraged (1972b).

Power

An adult can identify that a child is using power as his or her goal of misbehavior if the adult feels provoked, threatened, challenged or defeated. The instinctive responses
to those emotions are usually to fight back, give in, or find a way to be proven right. Like attention, when a parent or caregiver gives in to the emotional response it only serves to strengthen the child’s behavior. When a parent fights back he or she is now engaging in a power struggle with the child. This reinforces the child’s belief that he or she is significant only when in charge or while not allowing others to be in control. Parents and significant adults reacting emotionally to a child who uses power automatically give the power to the child. Reactions according to logic and the child’s mistaken belief are a more effective way to help the child use positive behaviors to find significance through power and control (Nelsen, 1981/1996;).

Emotionally charged responses used by adults dealing with children with the goal of power might lead to dangerous territory. An emotional response might guide the parent or caregiver to make strong statements and intensify his or her own behaviors in an attempt to show the child who is in control. This only serves to engage the child in a power struggle. The behavior of both adult and child are now stuck in a circular pattern which intensifies with each cycle (Nelsen et al, 1998). At some point, either the child or the parent will give in. If the parent gives in, it only reinforces the mistaken belief of the child that he or she has been successful in gaining significance through power and control. If the child gives in, it could mean that he or she has now become even more discouraged and could move towards the third goal of revenge (Dreikurs, 1972a).

In an effort to keep children from moving towards the goal of revenge, the parents or caregivers need to recognize when children are using power to gain significance. When adults realize that the child is using power they can modify their response to be more effective in their efforts to help the child participate in useful behaviors. The goal of
the adult is to help the child change his or her mistaken beliefs in order to allow the child to disengage in unwanted behaviors (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al, 1998; Pepper, 1977).

An effective response to a child who is using power to gain significance is to offer limited choices. This gives the child power to make a decision, but not power to do whatever he or she pleases. A parent could also ask the child for help in order to redirect the child towards positive behaviors (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al, 1998).

Sometimes a child is not ready for the adult to offer limited choices or ask for his or her help. The goal of power is guided by intense emotion and a child may need a cooling off period before he or she is ready for effective interventions. The adult may also need a period of time to cool off. It is essential that the adult remain calm and not fight back or give in to the demands of the child. The adult might first need to remove the child from the situation by taking him or her to another room. This action is a way to avoid becoming engaged in a power struggle as the parent is not leaving room for the child to resist his or her efforts. The adult carries through with this method by showing firmness and kindness in his or her actions (Nelsen et al, 1998).

This method has been referred to by Nelsen et al. (1998) as a positive time-out. This time allows both child and adult to calm their emotions in order to be effective problem solvers. After the time-out, the parent or caregiver and child can have a rational discussion about the conflict and attempt to problem solve the situation together. The problem solving session invites the child to help the adult come up with a solution. In a
sense, the positive time-out allows the other methods mentioned in this section to be implemented before the child moves on to the next goal of revenge (1998).

**Revenge**

A parent or caregiver may recognize that a child is using the goal of revenge in order to find significance if they feel hurt, disappointment, disbelief or disgust. It is important that the parent recognize these feelings and not turn towards anger as this will only result in a cycle of revenge between child and adult. Children who have moved on to the goal of revenge do so because they feel they have been hurt and can see no other option but to hurt others. An adult who reacts to this goal with anger is only reinforcing the child’s mistaken belief that he or she is insignificant and unlovable. These children feel they deserve to be hurt just as they feel they have a right to hurt back (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen, 1981/1996; Pepper, 1977).

A child who is trying to achieve significance through revenge is very emotional. It is crucial for the parent or caregiver to address the feelings of the child. The child is feeling hurt and the adult should acknowledge these hurt feelings to the child. Also, if the parent or caregiver is responsible for those feelings, an apology should be made to the child. The adult states the apology and avoids making excuses for the behavior that led to the hurt feelings. The child should be given the opportunity to express his or her hurt feelings while the adult engages in active listening. This lays the groundwork for the most important aspect of working effectively with a child who has the goal of revenge. The parent or caregiver should be encouraging and make sure that the message of love gets through to the child remembering that the child’s mistaken belief is, “I am incapable
of being loved” (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al, 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al., 1998; Pepper, 1977).

The effective response to a child who seeks revenge is to respect the child by listening to and acknowledging his or her feelings. A parent often ignores his or her true feelings of being hurt as well, and operates out of anger instead. A parent or caregiver displaying anger will not be effective and could even use behaviors or make statements that he or she will later regret, such as spanking or making untrue statements regarding the child’s value. While it might be easy to see how this could happen, given the highly emotional responses associated with revenge, it is not an effective way to manage a child’s behaviors. It could be helpful to parents, if they recognize their child is using revenge in an attempt to gain significance, to view the child as discouraged. This child needs reassurance that he or she is loved and that his or her opinions matter. This might give the child enough encouragement to keep from moving on to the final goal; a display of inadequacy (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al., 1998; Pepper, 1977).

Display of Inadequacy

A child whose mistaken goal is a display of inadequacy is highly discouraged. Parents and caregivers might recognize this goal if they have feelings of despair, hopelessness, helplessness or inadequacy themselves (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen, 1981/1996). The adults not only feel hopeless, but have enabled the children to feel this way as well by doing things for them that they may be able to do successfully on their own. If a child has had great misfortune in his or her young life, adults will sometimes take over even small tasks to
make things easier on the child. In the long run, the child begins to develop the mistaken belief that he or she is unworthy, incapable and will never have significance (Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al., 1998; Pepper, 1977). The child gives up trying to find significance and belonging; an innate goal for humans (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964).

Rather than taking over for the child and doing things for him or her, a parent or caregiver can encourage the child by having faith in his or her abilities. Allowing children to try new things and do even small tasks by themselves will plant the seeds of encouragement in the child. If a child makes a mistake, the adult can show the child how to learn from those mistakes in order to grow and have a higher chance at success in the future. Parents and caregivers may have a hard time altering their response to a child displaying inadequacy because they are so used to doing everything themselves. The adult only needs to imagine how discouraged a child must feel who has never been given the chance to try and fail, or even to try and succeed, in order to remind themselves of this more effective response (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1973; Dinkmeyer et al., 1979; National Network for Child Care, 1996; Nelsen et al., 1998; Pepper, 1977).

A child’s behavior develops into a pattern. The reaction of adults can influence that pattern and guide the child toward desirable behaviors if they give sufficient encouragement. A child who receives encouragement for the positive things he or she does has no reason to misbehave. If an adult is constantly pointing out mistakes, a child’s self-concept becomes threatened. Adults who deal with children would benefit from recognizing the power they have to help children develop a healthy self-concept.
Encouraging children will only build their self-esteem. In responding to any child it becomes crucial for the adult to choose his or her words carefully (Dinkmeyer, 1961).

**The Goals in Action**

After discussing the more effective responses versus the common response to each of the goals, it might be useful to look at each goal with a specific example of how to modify the response. The following paragraphs will outline a common behavior for each of the four goals and detail the modified response according to the chart in Figure 1. This chart includes the child’s mistaken belief, the parent’s feeling and common reaction to the goal, the child’s response to the parent’s attempt at correcting the misbehavior, and suggested alternatives for parents and caregivers to use (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979).

All of the following examples help in understanding how to use the chart in Figure 1 in order to modify the response. The scenarios are hypothetical and attempt to model typical interactions between parent and child, within the identified goal. These scenarios are condensed versions found in Nelsen et al. (1998)’s *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* (1998).

**Attention**

Scenario: A mother and her two daughters are in the waiting area of a doctor’s office. The older daughter Catherine has a fever and a cough. Mother wraps the ill daughter in her coat and feels her forehead. Mother is trying to make Catherine feel comfortable. The younger daughter Ann brings a book over to her mother and asks her to read it. The mother responds quickly with “not now” and reminds Ann that she was up most of the night and just wants to sit quietly. Ann sits quietly and a few minutes pass. Suddenly, she begins to bounce up and down on the chair. Her mother quickly asks her to
stop and reminds her to sit quietly. After another few minutes of sitting quietly, Ann asks to sit in her mother’s lap. The mother responds “No, of course not” and goes over to check Catherine’s fever once more. The mother and daughters are then called into the exam room and Ann begins to complain of a stomach ache as they wait for the doctor. The mother feels Ann’s forehead. When the doctor arrives to examine Catherine, Ann starts pulling on her mother’s sleeve and tells her she must use the bathroom. The mother sighs loudly and takes Ann to the bathroom (Nelsen et al, 1998).

It is clear through this example that Ann observes her sister Catherine getting a lot of attention for being sick. It is possible that Ann has come to the mistaken assumption that her mother loves Catherine more because of all the attention and concern she is giving to her. Ann has made several attempts to get attention from her mother. Of all the attempts she has made, Ann has only been successful in getting a few minutes of her mother’s attention. Ann believes that she can only be significant when she is receiving attention from her mother and will persist in her efforts to gain the attention even if it means she resorts to negative attempts. Ann’s self-worth is attached to her success in gaining attention and she believes she will never have the love of her mother if she does not find a way to get her mother involved with her (Nelsen et al, 1998).

Without knowing the mother’s feelings, it can be assumed that she is annoyed with the constant interruptions she is getting from Ann. She also lets out a loud sigh when she must take Ann to the bathroom, also indicating she most likely is feeling irritated. The mother responded to Ann’s behaviors by asking her to stop and reminding her of the long night she had. Ann’s mother also reminded her to sit quietly after each attempt Ann makes to gain attention. This common response only serves to reinforce Ann’s belief that
she is unworthy of the love her sister Catherine has. Ann’s mother is reminding her after each attempt that as hard as she tries she will not get the attention from her (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Ann still views her mother’s interest as temporarily satisfying her desire for attention. This is why Ann briefly stops the unwanted behaviors when her mother asks. This is another indication that Ann’s goal of misbehavior is attention. A child with the goal of attention is satisfied by any attention they receive; positive or negative, short-term or long-term. It can be assumed that she would be more satisfied with positive, long-term attention but the mother is unable to give her this type of attention at present. Now that it is clear Ann’s goal is attention, alternatives to the mother’s initial response can be discussed (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Rather than reinforce the child’s mistaken belief, the goal of the parent or caregiver is to encourage the child. A child who is successful in gaining attention for negative behaviors will continue to use those behaviors for attention-seeking in the future as well. Ann’s mother might have ignored her bouncing up and down on the chair. Ann’s mother now knows that her goal is attention and if Ann does not receive the attention she will try another behavior. Another way to encourage Ann to use positive behaviors to gain attention would be for her mother to notice desirable behaviors in her daughter and make sure to give those behaviors proper attention. It can be easy to overlook these behaviors in a child who is operating on the attention goal, but when a child is encouraged to continue positive behaviors it can make a world of difference to the parent-child relationship. The child will feel validated, encouraged and loved and the parent will feel pride in his or her child and also in his or her ability to parent (Nelsen et al., 1998).
Power

Scenario: Four year old Beverly is watching her mother’s computer screen with curiosity. She has seen both mother and father use the keyboard and is determined to try it for herself. She has been told in the past not to touch the computer and after looking around and seeing that her mother is not in sight she taps a few of the keys. Beverly’s mother turns the corner just in time to see her daughter touching the keys and rushes over to grab her daughter. She angrily states that she has told Beverly to stay off the computer and now Beverly has messed up her mother’s work. The mother slaps Beverly on the hand and Beverly responds by breaking free of her mother’s hold and banging on the keyboard. After a few minutes of going back and forth, Beverly’s mother picks her up and takes her to her bedroom for a “time-out”. Beverly proceeds to throw a tantrum and her mother storms out to check on her computer (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Beverly believes that she has no significance unless she can have power or control. If she does not have power, she will make sure that others do not have it either. This belief was demonstrated by Beverly feeling her power being threatened and by her increased aggression with her mother. She successfully engaged her mother in a power struggle until her mother walked away from the tantrum to check on her computer (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Beverly’s mother most likely felt provoked and defeated when she witnessed her daughter typing on the keyboard after she had been told not to touch it. Her mother had important work information on the computer and by playing with it Beverly may have altered the information. Beverly’s mother viewed the behavior as deliberate since she had told Beverly in the past not to use the computer. The mother may have also felt defeated
because the rules that were put in place were ineffective. The feelings of being provoked and defeated can help Beverly’s mother realize that her child was feeling powerless and was trying to find a way to feel significant in her mother’s world (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Beverly’s mother did not recognize her child’s mistaken belief because she had not been given the tools to recognize how to handle her daughter according to the goal of power. Her mother reacted with strong behaviors and harsh words as she quickly raced across the room to remove Beverly from the computer. This could be scary and threatening to a small child. Beverly’s mother also stated sternly that her daughter has been told in the past not to touch the keyboard and that she had now messed up her mother’s files. It is likely that Beverly’s mother was concerned about the files on her computer and she felt Beverly had deliberately neglected the rules. This reaction only served to strengthen Beverly’s belief that she has no control or power, especially after she retaliated by intensifying her own behavior. The power struggle that Beverly and her mother engaged in likely left both persons feeling defeated and powerless (Nelsen et al., 1998).

A more effective approach to a child who engages in power struggles would be to recognize the parent’s power to engage or disengage the power struggle. Giving choices to a child gives them the power over what they choose (Nelsen et al., 1998). In days past, the authoritarian parent made demands on a child (Baumrind, 1966). A better way to encourage and empower a child is to offer limited choices and state expectations clearly. Beverly’s mother could have said that the computer is for her to work on and given Beverly two choices of what activity she would like to do. This way Beverly does not feel powerless by her mother simply stating what she cannot do. Another solution would
be for Beverly’s mother to help her use the computer for games that are appropriate for her age. This is another way for Beverly to feel she has power because she is able to satisfy her curiosity and her mother does not have a reason to be upset if she is supervising. Also, Beverly is able to feel encouraged to use the computer and not have to sneak around to see if her mother is watching. This could be a time for mother and daughter to do an activity together that they both enjoy (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Revenge

Scenario: Three year-old Alice’s father was getting her ready for bed. He announces that it is time to put her pajamas on and Alice continues playing with the bubbles in the sink. Alice’s father is growing impatient as Alice spills a glass of water on the floor. Assuming that Alice has spilled the water on purpose, her father becomes angry and spansks Alice. Alice begins to cry and it is a struggle for her father to get her into her pajamas as she is kicking and wiggling. After he finally gets her into the pajamas, Alice’s father grumpily picks out a bedtime story and Alice announces her dislike for that particular book. She then states that she wants her mother to read the book and not her father. Her father is in disbelief at her remark and is hurt that she has chosen her mother to read instead of him (Nelsen et al., 1998).

This scenario is remarkably similar to the previous example of Beverly and her mother. The child’s reaction to her father was instant and aggressive, just as Beverly’s reaction was to her mother. This example will show how important it is to recognize the parent’s emotional response in order to differentiate between the goals of misbehavior. The parent’s emotional reaction is one of the clearest distinctions to determine which goal the child is displaying (Nelsen et al., 1998).
Alice’s father was in disbelief and felt hurt at her rejection. This tells us that Alice is using the goal of revenge to gain significance. Alice was hurt by her father’s anger toward her spilling the water and also that he spanked her. Alice felt that if she were to have any significance she would have to hurt her father as he hurt her. She started retaliating by becoming difficult to dress. Then she attacked her father verbally by stating she hated the book he picked out and adding that she wanted her mother to read the book and not him. It is not hard to see the sequence of events that led to the father’s hurt feelings (Nelsen et al., 1998).

The difference between Alice and Beverly is the mistaken beliefs that fueled their reactions. Beverly believed that she must have power in order to be significant, and in Alice’s case, she believed she needed to hurt others as she had been hurt. Alice’s father surely was hurt by her rejection. Alice may have spilled the water on purpose, or it may have been an accident. Her feelings were hurt by her father’s reaction and she could only respond with revenge. A child who uses revenge as a goal of misbehavior does so because he or she is feeling hurt. Alice is only three and may not have been able to say that spilling the water was an accident. Instead she tells her father that she feels the spanking was unfair through her actions of trying to get even (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Alice’s father was trying to respond the best way he knew how. If he had known what to look for in Alice’s behavior, he most likely would not have chosen to spank his child. He would have been able to read his initial feelings of disbelief that she would deliberately spill water and would have chosen another reaction. Most importantly, he must acknowledge Alice’s hurt feelings as they work together to clean up the mess. The goal of the parent whose child uses revenge is to make amends with the child by
apologizing if necessary, listening to the child’s feelings and sending messages of love to
the child (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Display of Inadequacy

Scenario: Jean is turning five years old today and lives with her grandparents. They anxiously await her reaction to the brand new bike they bought her for her birthday. Jean does not react and her grandmother asks what she thinks of the new bike. Jean still does not respond and her grandmother coaxingly tells her to look at her wonderful new bike. Jean shakes her head and states that she does not know how to ride a bike. Her grandfather encourages her not to worry and that she will soon learn. Jean ignores the bike as her grandfather pours her cereal for her. Jean’s grandparents look at each other and shrug their shoulders as if to say, “What’s the use?” (Nelsen et al., 1998)

Jean’s grandparents feel hopeless and feel like giving up. Jean has already given up so her grandparents feel despair in their efforts to keep encouraging her. Jean’s mistaken belief driving her actions is that she is no good and cannot do anything right so why should she keep trying? This type of attitude is contagious as can be seen by her grandparents’ feelings of hopelessness and despair in their efforts to encourage Jean (Nelsen et al., 1998).

This scenario is another example showing the importance of the parents’ or caregivers’ feelings in order to identify the child’s goal. Jean did not misbehave, but her actions sent a clear message that she has given up on herself. Her grandparents got this message some time ago as her grandfather is still getting her breakfast for her. They are both doing things for Jean that she can do for herself and Jean has gotten the mistaken belief that she is unable to do things. She is highly discouraged (Nelsen et al., 1998).
The grandparents’ reaction was very passive. They attempted to coax Jean into encouragement but ultimately shrugged their shoulders and gave up themselves. This passive behavior is what has given Jean the impression that she is unworthy. Even the efforts to encourage Jean, saying she would be a wonderful bike rider, were minimal. Jean has no reason to believe in herself if her grandparents do not believe in her (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Altering a reaction to a child using a display of inadequacy can be difficult as there are often no misbehaviors to trigger a new response. The reaction has to be more frequent and the parent or caregiver must be genuine in his or her efforts. The adult has to have faith in the child’s abilities and encourage even small efforts. Jean’s grandparents could build up Jean’s confidence in trying out the bike by encouraging her to take on more responsibility in her daily activities. For example, Jean’s grandfather might ask for Jean’s help in getting her breakfast prepared. In a few days, Jean might be able to get her own breakfast and her confidence will have increased. When Jean’s grandparents show their faith, and take time to help her learn and grow, it sends a message to Jean that conflicts with her mistaken belief. Over time, Jean will see that even mistakes can help her learn and gain confidence by showing her what not to do the next time she attempts a task (Nelsen et al., 1998).

Discussion

The four goals of misbehavior attempt to describe children’s behavior as fitting into one of four categories (Dreikurs, 1972b). Several ways to identify the unique goals of individual children have been discussed including the parent’s feelings, their initial reaction and the child’s reaction to the parent’s initial reaction. Although the parent’s
feelings are very important to help identify the goal of the child, it is more important to look at the whole picture; the behavior of the child, initial feeling and response of the parent, and the child’s reaction to the parent’s attempt to correct the behavior (Nelsen, 1981/1996).

This paper has given a detailed description for each of the four goals of misbehavior. It has also given insight concerning how to identify the goal a child is using. Once the goal has been identified, a parent or caregiver must acknowledge his or her part in helping the child use the goal in a useful way. In identifying the goal of the child, the parent gains insight into the child’s mistaken assumptions about his or her self worth. The adult is able to use this information to help the child see that his or her belief is untrue and that the child is capable of belonging and worthy of love just as they are. After all, Alfred Adler theorized that it is the innate drive of human beings to belong (Ansbacher et al., 1956/1964).

This paper has outlined common reactions to each of the goals and given suggestions for more effective responses by the parent. In an effort to clarify these ideas further, this paper has given specific examples of how to modify the parental response to the misbehavior for each goal (Nelsen et al., 1998). The modification of response coincides with Figure 1, which also serves to clarify the information presented in this paper, and can be used as a quick reference for parents and caregivers wanting to explore this modification with their children (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979).

The contents of this paper present one approach for effectively handling a misbehaving child, along with some insight into the reasons for their misbehavior (Kottman et al., 1990). Parenting is personal and each parent will have to decide on a
method with which they feel comfortable. The parents who feel there is a reason behind their child’s behavior and want to help guide their child towards useful behaviors may find this information helpful (Dreikurs, 1972a).

It can be frustrating to parents when their children misbehave. Over time, there have been volumes of information printed on parenting. Some have argued that parenting styles are the answer to a misbehaving child (Baumrind, 1966). Others believe that parenting styles have nothing to do with a misbehaving child but, rather, the internal thought process is to blame (Dreikurs, 1972b). The reality is that researchers may never have the answers as to why a child misbehaves or how to effectively deal with a child who is displaying unwanted behaviors. This will continue to be a topic of interest to the research community as long as there are parents seeking advice.

In researching this topic of how to effectively deal with a child using one of the four goals of misbehavior, it was noted that there is a lack of formal research that has been conducted on this topic. There is plenty of information on the four goals, but it appears to be observational at best. Researchers have the mold already set in place, now the information needs to be formally tested. Do children really act on one of the four goals according to their mistaken beliefs? This could be the answer that parents have been looking for all these centuries. Individual Psychology may be close to finding a formula that works for behavior modification.

If the information described in this paper does not meet the test of formalized research, at least it provides a common language for professionals and parents to describe children’s behavior. The information on parenting will only grow over time, and Rudolf
Dreikurs et al. (1990) have given common ground to the professionals writing on this topic.
References


### Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Faulty Belief</th>
<th>Child’s Goal</th>
<th>Parent’s Feeling and Reaction</th>
<th>Child’s Response to Parent’s Attempt at Correction</th>
<th>Alternatives for Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I belong only when I am being noticed or served. | **Attention** | Feeling: Annoyed  
Reaction: Tendency to remind or coax. | Temporarily stops misbehavior. Later resumes same behavior or disturbs in another way. | Ignore misbehavior when possible. Give attention for positive behavior when child is not making a bid for it. Avoid undue service. Realize that reminding, punishing, rewarding, coaxing, and service are undue attention. |
| I belong only when I am in control or am boss, or when I am proving no one can boss me! | **Power** | Feeling: Angry; provoked; as if one’s authority is threatened.  
Reaction: Tendency to fight or to give in. | Active- or passive-aggressive misbehavior is intensified, or child submits with “defiant compliance.” | Withdraw from conflict. Help child see how to use power constructively by appealing for child’s help in enlisting cooperation. Realize that fighting or giving in only increases child’s desire for power. |
| I belong only by hurting others as I feel hurt. I cannot be loved. | **Revenge** | Feeling: Deeply hurt.  
Reaction: Tendency to retaliate and get even. | Seeks further revenge by intensifying misbehavior or choosing another weapon. | Avoid feeling hurt. Avoid punishment and retaliation. Build trusting relationship; convince child that she or he is loved. |
| I belong only by convincing others not to expect anything from me. I am unable; I am helpless. | **Display of Inadequacy** | Feeling: Despair; hopelessness. “I give up.”  
Reaction: Tendency to agree with child that nothing can be done. | Passively responds or fails to respond to whatever is done. Shows no improvement. | Stop all criticism. Encourage any positive attempt, no matter how small; focus on assets. Above all, don’t be hooked into pity, and don’t give up. |