

Misbehavior is a Form of Communication

Parents often feel overwhelmed with trying to keep up with their children, and, paradoxically, children are gifted with the ability to keep their parents on their toes. In order to feel a little less overwhelmed, I suggest that parents learn to be proactive with their child. One of the primary ways to do this is to make sure that you're looking beyond words and behaviors to find the root of the issue. It is so easy to become distracted by our children's emotional words and behavior, but these are often the symptoms of an issue that lies beneath the surface. For example, if your child has a runny nose, it can be frustrating. In addition to tossing them a box of tissues, it is beneficial to figure out what is causing the runny nose, for your child's wellbeing and for you as the parent. Is the runny nose because of a cold, the flu, or allergies? The way that you treat the runny nose will differ depending on the cause. Similarly, it is helpful to consider what might be the underlying cause of certain symptoms and behaviors that your child is exhibiting.

Let's use the analogy of the Titanic. The captain of the Titanic saw the iceberg as they approached it. He was surely alarmed, not by what he could see, but by what he knew was under the surface. He knew that an iceberg is roughly $\frac{1}{8}$ above the surface and $\frac{7}{8}$ below the surface. He was only seeing the tip of the iceberg, and there was, quite literally, a mountain underneath. Ultimately, it wasn't the visible part of the iceberg that created the hole that sunk the Titanic; it was the mountain underneath. Parents tend to stay above the surface with their children and address the $\frac{1}{8}$ that they can see: their child's words and emotional behavior. When this happens you can find yourself in an exhausting cycle of constantly being behind the eight ball, and feeling run over by the challenging behavior of your child. This is reactive parenting, instead of proactive parenting, where you stay one step ahead. To stay one step ahead, I encourage using observation skills and a healthy, respectful curiosity to tune in to what is going on with your child, as you will see in the following example.

Years ago, some close friends of ours had a baby. A week or so after the baby was born we went to their house for breakfast and to meet the newest addition to their family. I love holding babies, so I was very excited to have a chance to hold the baby when we arrived. As I reached for the baby, the three year old (let's call her Katy) said, "No! Mommy hold the baby!" As most of us probably would, her mom started to explain, "It's okay. Leslie has had kids, you know Travis, Carrie, and Dale? She knows how to hold babies." I reached for the baby again, and Katy said, more loudly this time, "**NO! Mommy hold the baby!**" This time, her father tried distraction. He suggested that

she go and show Dale and Carrie her rocking horse in the other room. Brilliant strategy, but it too failed to calm Katy's concerns about her baby brother. She **stamped her feet**, made her **hands into fists**, and **she insisted** that mommy hold the baby.

Naturally, this is frustrating and embarrassing to the parents, so her father told her that if she didn't stop with her tantrum she would be put in her room for a time out. All of these attempts to manage her behavior were staying above the surface. They were addressing the tip of the iceberg; meanwhile, the real issue went unaddressed. I decided to chime in at this point and said to Katy, "You want to make sure your baby brother is safe and that he's okay." Immediately she turned to her father and, with a very sweet tone, asked if she could have a bagel with cream cheese. I took a guess at what might be below the surface of her words and behaviors, and spoke to her deeper concern for her brother. This freed Katy up to focus on the next concern, her desire for a bagel. Katy's misbehavior was clearly trying to communicate to the adults something she could not understand but sincerely needed to express. It is clear with this example that the misbehavior got louder, both literally and figuratively, as time went on. Let's start to listen to our children's misbehavior as the valuable form of communication that it often is.