

My behaviours are speaking to you. Do you understand them?

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When Lisa was a new mom, she often paced the room, cradling baby Britney in her arms as she cried incessantly. Not being able to figure out what was making her daughter howl was extremely distressing. She knew that with every piercing shriek her neighbours were shaking their heads. “Tut-tut. What a bad mother!”

Within the span of twelve weeks, Lisa’s whole world changed. She’d cracked the code! She now knew which cry meant “I’m in pain” She knew that kicking her legs meant Britney was excited. And she could distinguish a happy smile from a gassy one. The more Lisa understood Britney’s temperament and observed the patterns, the more she was able to interpret every nuance of her behaviour.

Twelve years later, Lisa’s world had changed again. Somehow, Britney had acquired a whole new mystifying “language of behaviour” – and there was no code-book for this one! Britney began acting out, which caused a rift in their close relationship. Lisa wondered whether Britney was just a typical grouchy, hormonal adolescent or if there was something more behind her emotional outbursts. She remembered how she felt as a new mom and how she overcame that difficult period by attempting to understand what was causing Britney’s behaviour. She decided to sit down with Britney and talk. Lisa emphasized that the purpose of the conversation wasn’t to assign blame and be critical, which encouraged Britney to gradually open up. Lisa learned about her daughter’s constant struggles to do the right thing amid peer pressure, and the ongoing stress it evoked. Together, they discussed Britney’s challenges openly, and brainstormed some helpful strategies to address them. Their good relationship returned, and is now stronger than ever.

Lisa was actually quite fortunate that Britney was able to communicate and even identify her needs and fears. For many parents, especially those of exceptional children, this is not their reality. Their children may not be able to use words, for example, or may not understand the complex issues underlying their anger, frustration, and/or anxiety, which in turn form the basis for their behaviours. The pain of being teased and taunted, for instance, might be so strong that even if a child could express it verbally, he or she may not be able to release it emotionally. Many children have a different mode of communication and even culture. It’s almost as if they’ve landed here from another planet, with a different language and foreign rules. They are not only unfamiliar with the “hidden curriculum”¹ of our world, they may also have a hidden curriculum of their own.

¹ “*Hidden curriculum*” is a term used since the 1960’s to describe the social rules and expectations that are never explicitly taught but which most children unconsciously pick up – for example, that a lunch box is perfectly OK in kindergarten, but by Grade 2, it’s paper bags only!

So how do parents learn to decipher their children's behaviours? The first step is to recognize that each behaviour conveys a message, even if the child may not be consciously aware of it. Look for clues and patterns. Then consider possible explanations. Here are a few examples:

Behaviour 1: "My son refuses to do his homework." "My daughter lies about having no homework." "Our home turns into a war-zone when it's homework time."

Possible interpretation: Homework avoidance can be frustrating for parents, particularly when they believe their child is capable of doing the work. Yet even the most gifted child can have "pockets" of weaknesses that make homework a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Your child's behaviour could signify a problem with memory, or what's called an executive function deficit, like being unable to plan and organize an assignment or to break a project down into accomplishable steps. It could indicate an inability to focus attention for more than brief periods at a time, or difficulties with time-management. It could also be that years of repeated failures have created a self-fulfilling prophecy for your child, who thinks there's no way he or she is going to be able to get it all done, let alone do it right. In your child's mind, the only thing that will come out of doing homework is proving that he or she is "stupid"; as such, your child will do anything to avoid it.

Behaviour 2: "Nothing, not even dynamite, can get my son out of bed on a school day, but he'll get up at 6 am on Saturday to play video games!"

Possible interpretation: Many children don't like to get up for school, but most are able to do it, however reluctantly. For some children, however, this reluctance is taken to a whole new level. In the above example, there could be many reasons behind the child's dislike of going to school. One might have to do with low self-esteem. In his PBS video "When the Chips Are Down ... Strategies for Improving Children's Behavior" Rick Lavoie, a nationally-known expert on learning disabilities, likens self-esteem to poker chips. The more you have, the more you can afford to risk. The smartest, most popular boy in school has thousands of chips in his stash. He can do a "face-plant" in a crowded hallway and he'll still have enough chips left to glide effortlessly through the day. But maybe your son, who might be socially or physically awkward, or has learning problems, only has a few chips to begin with. One wrong move, one more social gaffe or embarrassing incident, and he'll be wiped out. Lavoie says that when the boy in the above example resists going to school, he's really saying, "I don't have enough chips to play the game (of school)!" Of course, his draw toward video games is something else entirely. Video games might represent the only world in which your son feels competent, and in full control.

Behaviour 3: "I swear our daughter deliberately messes up – has meltdowns/crises/acts out at school, etc. - just when things are finally going well."

Possible interpretation: Some children actually become so accustomed to living with drama and crises that they don't know how to function otherwise; they're most comfortable in chaos. It could be that when your daughter acts out, it's the only time she

feels she receives attention – even if it’s negative. A young woman, who “burned through” several different special education programs as a girl, later told me that she deliberately sabotaged her own success in a few schools because the more she improved, the more she could feel resource personnel “pulling away from her.” The idea of facing the world with no support was too terrifying for her to contemplate.

Responding with help

There are as many examples of troubling behaviours, and as many explanations for each one, as there are children. Whether your child is suffering from hypersensitivities (where hiding under the table might mean “I hate glue on my hands” or refusal to eat might mean “it’s not the taste of mashed potatoes, it’s the gross texture!”), or an executive function problem (like being unable to deal with changes, or control one’s emotions), or whether your child is manifesting extreme frustration at having a bright mind that keeps getting tripped up by one area of weakness, the bottom line is the same: If you can figure out what your child’s behaviour is telling you, you’ll be able to respond. Considering the behaviour as a cry for help, instead of a deliberate, malicious act that warrants punishment, will put you in a better position to offer support.

I know that deciphering your child’s behaviours is easier said than done. But think of it as playing detective. Talk to teachers, relatives, and others you trust, who know your child. They might have some ideas about what’s bothering him or her, which they’ve been reluctant to share for fear of interfering. If your child is old enough and able to communicate, he or she might be able to help you brainstorm the real reason behind a given behaviour. Join a support group, locally or online. Other parents may be facing the same challenges and have some good suggestions. Seek professional advice from a clinician. Keep a daily journal – it might help you identify a pattern over time. And trust your instincts. You know your child better than anyone.

When you’ve narrowed it down to one or two possibilities, you can do a “test drive” if you’re not sure – by talking to your child about it, if that’s a possibility, and/or by trying out a few problem-solving strategies and watching to see if the behaviour changes. If not, and you feel you’ve given it a reasonable amount of time, then it’s back to playing detective.

Only once you’ve figured out the message behind the behaviours, can you shift your focus to changing them – by giving your child the tools (like words or any other method of communication) to express his or her feelings more effectively, and by working on eliminating or reducing the underlying problem as much as possible.

Most importantly, in your heart and in your thoughts, you know that you are punishing less, sharing more, communicating more, and teaching more. You may never get a Parent-of-the-Year award from those judgmental neighbours, but you just might end up toasting your success with a World’s Best Mom or Dad coffee mug ... which is way more important!