

**Bad Behavior Thrives**  
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Your 6-year-old is demanding a cookie before dinner. It starts with a request, escalates to a demand and goes all the way to a temper tantrum and fit, screaming, yelling, threatening, holding the entire family hostage to the tirade. Everyone is angry and upset at each other having a disturbed dinner, often going to bed without resolution. The whole house is turned upside down.

It has worked before many times! And it will work again! The child has gotten his way.

Your 11-year-old makes everyone late for school or work every day. He dawdles, reads, plays on his computer, teases his older sister and the dog intermittently or goes back to bed instead of getting ready.

When asked, told, ordered, threatened, he acts as if he doesn't hear and mumbles words nonstop and mimics back what you are saying. He gets in a car, forgets his lunch and homework, has to come back home to get it, and escalates to the point at which there is no choice but to give in. Everyone's late for school and work, upset yelling and crying.

It has worked many times and it will work again!

Your 16-year-old is in that impossible moment where everything is dramatic and high level angst. Outbursts happen without warning. Attitudes wax and wane for no apparent reason. She has had a bad day. She will now inflict her bad day and mood on anyone who gets in her way. She is an emotional beast during dinner and everyone is relieved when she stomps off to her room, slams her door and plays to her music, loudly. No one is brave enough to confront her and tell her to turn it down, and furthermore, it is not worth it to anybody's well-being to call her back to do her after-dinner chores. It is easier for anyone else to do them. She has successfully guided the family into her nasty mood, and in effect ruined the evening.

It has worked many times and it will work again!

What has happened in all three of these scenarios is that a child has acted badly. The child has taken up all or most of the space in the household and left everyone else cowering, huddling together in the small corner that is left. She has bullied the family into submission. He has intimidated the family into fear. The child has performed an unpleasant, inappropriate behavior and actually been rewarded for it. She has gotten out of her dinner chores, was allowed to slam her door and play her music loudly. He has disrupted the whole family dynamic and made everyone unhappy, and late for school or work.

In order to sustain a bad behavior, the child needs to get the result he is looking for. Otherwise there is no energy, purpose or zeal to repeat the behavior.

All that is needed is for the parent, sibling or other caregiver to notice the behavior, figure out the desired result, and make sure that in spite of any and all escalation he does not get that result. Make sure in fact that she gets an appropriate, well-matched undesired result, or better yet no result or attention at all.

Next time your child performs a particular, repeated, habitual unpleasant behavior identify the child's desired result, be it to derail the family, intimidate others, avoid chores, obtain the treat, avoid the bedtime, make everyone late for school, or just simply to push everyone so hard that they explode in meltdown themselves. Make sure you have anticipated it, named the desired result of the child, and then initiate your previously rehearsed result which does not reward the child's bad behavior. The first few times it may be necessary to remove all family members from the room and to deal with the child one-on-one. Simply provide a safe space, observe and witness the episode. (Dispassionately intervene only in the case of danger). Bad behavior longs for and feeds on an audience, attention, center-stage, chaos, reactivity, engagement, impatience and verbally and physically abusive responses. Don't fall into the trap! It is full of emotional quicksand, sticky tar-like energy as well as further escalated bad behavior.

Once you have extinguished the motive for the behavior, and a bit of time has passed, you can let the child know the positive alternatives, opportunities, treats, incentives, and rewards that would have been possible had the time not been spent on bad behaviors, meltdowns, tantrums, tirades, threats, rage and violence.

Good behavior warrants pleasant and rewarding results. Bad behavior loses its power when it is consistently denied the result it is wanting.