

## Problem Behavior

Dr. Matt Sanders

It is plain enough when we read in the daily newspaper of a child engaging in some highly dangerous practice such as jumping on and off moving trains for the fun of it that this is a 'problem' behavior that needs to be discouraged.

Likewise, much of our policing and legal systems are aimed toward discouraging the behavior of adults who engage in illegal or dangerous acts that bring about loss, property damage or injury.

For parents though, the issue of dealing with behavior problems is often a lot less clear. Our children will always misbehave at times, do things we might not agree with, and act in ways that annoy or upset us.

Child rearing is strongly influenced by a parent's values and beliefs. What we see as being either acceptable or problem behavior is influenced by the values we consider important. For example, parents who view total obedience as important to family life may well interpret an adolescence's attempts to argue a differing point of view as a challenge to adult authority. Another parent may see it as a child learning to express an independent opinion.

I have always encouraged parents to help their children become responsible, self-reliant and self-disciplined; able to make independent decisions and solve problems. At the same time, children need to become civilized and socially skilled human beings capable of living in harmony with those around them.

So how does a parent recognize the point when their child is showing a serious behavior problem requiring some outside help instead of something able to be dealt with through a bit of positive parenting?

All children behave at times in irritating, disruptive ways that may produce conflict within the family. 'Problems' such as making faces at the dinner table for example are seen in many children of a similar age.

Other behaviors such as crying, fussing, whining, attention seeking, fussy eating, bedtime difficulties, disobedience and thumb sucking are problems that usually decrease with maturity if handled sensibly. Likewise, hassles getting children to follow routines such as bathing, dressing, shopping or cleaning their teeth can be dealt with by parents effectively to prevent more difficult problems arising.

Of course, parents can't assume that these normal problem behaviors will simply go away without effort.

Don't fall for the old "it's just a phase, he'll grow out of it" trick.

# raise & Shine

Healthy children—body, heart and mind.

Improvements in a child's behavior will not begin until action is taken. Parents need to learn positive alternative ways of reacting to a child's behavior when dealing with problems. Sometimes it takes just a minor adjustment in a strategy or tactic. Other times may call on a rearrangement of a parent's own priorities to allow more time for their child.

Even with attentive, caring parents, some children do develop more serious behavior problems. The easiest way to recognize whether your family could benefit from professional help is to look at your child's behavior in relation to other children of a similar age. For example, a behaviorally disturbed youngster may not just occasionally fight with his brothers and sisters, but will also get into repeated fights at school, lose their temper frequently and destroy other children's belongings with little guilt or remorse. Troublesome behavior like this tends to occur frequently and persists over time.

It is important to seek help if your child shows repeated examples of antisocial behavior or emotional disturbances such as excessive worry, depression fear or obsessions. Help is available, although, disturbingly, research has shown that only one in five parents make use of professional support, and only two percent of children with identifiable mental health problems receive specialist mental health assistance.

**Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program.**

*For local resources on Positive Parenting support for common behavior issues such as tantrums, whining, disobedience, bedtime problems and more contact Raise & Shine at 707-463-1233 or visit [www.raiseandshine.org](http://www.raiseandshine.org) for a schedule of free workshops, classes and private consultations in your area.*