Why Our Kids Are Out of Control

Michael is out of control. He has several temper tantrums a day, throws food during meals, deliberately breaks toys and household items, hits and bites his younger brother and sister and refuses to comply with reasonable requests. Asked to put away his toys or go to bed, the 5-year-old replies, "No. And you can't make me." He is, in truth, a very unpleasant child. He is also very unhappy: No one can behave as he does and feel good about himself or be pleased with life. We seem to be in the midst of an epidemic of Michaels. I have been a child psychologist for 35 years, and each year I see [parents](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting) dealing with more and more severe problems. Their children are not just ill-mannered, they are whiny, selfish, arrogant, rude, defiant and violent. Most of them are also miserable, as are their parents.

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Such disgraceful behavior in young children predicts serious problems later in life. As adolescents they are more likely to drop out of school, use [drugs](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychopharmacology), engage in delinquency and be clinically depressed. And when I read newspaper articles about road [rage](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger), commuter rage and office rage it seems to me that many out-of-control children are growing up to be out-of-control adults. Why are there so many out-of-control children today? Many explanations have been proposed: high-sugar diets, environmental toxins, allergies, television, [psychiatric](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychiatry) disorders. In considering these theories, it is useful to note that the rise in outrageous child behavior is largely an American phenomenon. Psychologist Tiffany Field, Ph.D., of the University of Miami School of Medicine, found that in France, for example, 3-year-olds behave admirably in restaurants. They sit quietly and talk and eat their meals like "little adults." They do not argue or throw food or refuse to eat as many American children do.

In a separate study, Field noted another major difference in the behavior of French and American preschoolers: On playgrounds, French youngsters were aggressive toward their playmates only 1 percent of the time; American preschoolers, by contrast, were aggressive 29 percent of the time. It is probably not a coincidence that France has the lowest murder rate in the industrialized world, and the United States has the highest. Can such dramatic differences in behavior between advanced, industrialized nations be accounted for by differences in [diet](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/diet), toxins, allergies, television or psychiatric disorders? It seems extremely unlikely, and I have found no scientific evidence to support these theories. I suggest that the fundamental reason behind so many more American children running amok is child-rearing practices.

Researchers have shown that the disruptive behavior of school children is often a result of adult attention. In studies of elementary school classrooms, for example, researchers found some students repeatedly left their seats without good reason. Typically the teacher interrupted the lesson to reprimand them. But these efforts often increased the frequency of wandering. When the teacher ignored children who wandered and paid attention to those who worked hard, the frequency of the problem behavior usually fell sharply. It may seem odd that reprimands, threats and criticism can actually reward bad behavior, but such is the tremendous power of adult attention. When children can get attention by behaving well, they do.

In Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care (Pocket Books, 1998), a book that has sold 40 million copies, Dr. Spock recommends this approach in dealing with aggressive behavior: "If your child is hurting another or looks as if he were planning murder, pull him away in a matter-of-fact manner and get him interested in something else." Given what research shows about the effects of adult attention, getting a child "interested in something else" whenever he is aggressive is a sure formula for producing a highly aggressive child.

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Many of the most popular child-rearing books are full of such nonsense. They repeatedly urge parents to hold, soothe, comfort and talk to a child who bites, hits, screams, throws or breaks things, ignores or refuses parental requests or otherwise behaves in obnoxious, infantile ways. Common sense and a truckload of research argue solidly against this practice. Yet these experts seem to be unaware of the well-established fact that children do what gets noticed, that adult attention usually makes behavior more likely to occur, not less. Nevertheless, thousands of parents follow the bad advice of these and like-minded child-rearing gurus every day. And the more faithfully they follow the advice, the worse their children become. Some of these parents eventually find their way to my office, desperate for help. I advise them to redirect their attention from infantile behavior to grown-up behavior. They are often amazed by the change in their children.

Take Dennis, for example. Ten-year-old Dennis was a "born [liar](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception)," according to his mother, who added, "he wouldn't tell the truth if his life depended on it." Dennis had several siblings, but he was the only chronic liar. Why Dennis? With several children in the family, there was a good deal of [competition](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition) for adult attention. Dennis wanted more than his share, and he got it by lying: His mother spent a lot of time with him trying to separate fact from fiction and trying to understand why he lied. Mom didn't realize it, but all this attention just encouraged dishonesty. The solution was to give Dennis attention when it was clear he was telling the truth and to ignore him when he might be lying. When Mom knew that Dennis had given her the right amount of change after a purchase, or when a discrete call to his teacher proved that he really had been kept after school, he got time with Mom and approval for telling the truth. Instead of "tell a lie, get attention," the rule became, "tell the truth, get attention." When the rule changed, so did Dennis.

The Nurture Response can be an interesting philosophy for some to swallow. Some dangerous or extremely annoying forms of behavior, such as knocking other children down or having screaming tantrums, may require additional measures, including [punishment](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/punishment). However, for the most part, this response can be used to see how much can be accomplished by simply **ignoring the behavior you don't want and noticing the behavior you do want.**

For decades many child-rearing icons have urged parents to pay special attention to troublesome behavior, to offer sympathy, [understanding](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) and reassurance when children behave in outrageous ways. This view so pervades our society that scarcely anyone questions it. Both common sense and scientific evidence tell us, however, that this approach is bound to backfire, and it does.

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1. What explanations have been proposed to explain why children are out of control?

2. According to the article there is an obvious difference in the behavior between children in America and children in France. Explain that difference. Do you agree?

3. What do studies show about problem behaviors? (What is the result?)

4. What does Dr. Spock recommend in dealing with aggressive behavior?

5. How did the article explain Dennis’s reasons for being a chronic liar and what was the solution for changing this behavior?

6. Explain the Nurture Response. Do you think this approach works in child rearing?