**How to Address Revenge-Seeking Behavior in Children**

**Source-** [www.cornerstonesforparents.com](http://www.cornerstonesforparents.com)

**Written by-** Laura Kuehn (Laura is a licensed therapist who offers parent counseling services to families in Connecticut. She loves to equip and encourage parents of kids of all ages.)

**What revenge-seeking behavior looks like:**

Children who make it their goal to hurt others are not hard to find. Their pain is obvious by the pain they cause others. They reveal their struggle in the following ways:

* Saying hurtful things such as, “You don’t even love me!” or “I hate you!”
* Damaging something belonging to an authority figure (may say it was an “accident”)
* Unprovoked injury of younger child/sibling (often a baby or toddler)
* Mean-spiritedness
* Extreme reactions to accidents against their person or possessions
* Dismissing a gift or special treatment by a parent (unappreciative)
* Focus on wanting to get even or things being “fair”

**Note:** Children with revenge-seeking behavior often have underlying issues related to attachment, trauma or developmental difficulties. It is important for parents to rule out any concurrent neurological or developmental issues. Please see the comment section for links to resources for children struggling with autism, emotional regulation or sensory processing.

**What revenge-seeking behavior feels like to you:**

Parents of revenge-seeking children often find themselves first feeling hurt which then can quickly change to resentment, retaliation and a desire to get even. You may even find yourself saying things like, “He is so ungrateful! He doesn’t appreciate anything.” “I would never have treated my parents like that!” or “I just don’t understand why he would do something like that.”

**What his behavior tells you:**

This type of behavior is a sure sign that your child feels that he is of little worth or value in the world. He sees the world as hostile and himself as a victim of that hostility. He may have experienced a loss, a disruption in attachment or another trauma. To cope with such feelings, he lashes out and gives those around him a “taste of his own medicine.” Discouragement is his most frequent companion. He is often identified as the “black sheep” in the family – and once that identifying marker is hung on his neck, it is hard to remove. Once he feels he is bad, he will continue to act in such a way to confirm his perception that he deserves such a negative label.

**How to correct revenge-seeking behavior:**

These children can be a challenge to parent as their presence is very hard and rejecting. Getting beneath that hardened exterior is a parent’s primary goal. Here are some ways you can parent a child exhibiting revenge-seeking behavior.

**1) Practice empathy**

The most important corrective action you can take to help a child who misbehaves out of revenge is to create, build and maintain a positive, open relationship. Empathetic listening is one way you can help facilitate such a relationship. Listening without jumping in without quick fixes or judgments will go a long way in helping your child to begin to trade in those feelings of despair for hope. Knowing that someone is willing to listen with unconditional love is essential for these types of kids.

You will also need to spend time accessing your own empathetic stance toward this child. I suggest that parents practice something called “compassionate observation.” This is a time when you unobtrusively observe your child and focus on better days. Maybe when they were a baby or a time when you felt connected. Access those previous feelings and pull them into the present. If it is not your child (such as in foster care or kindred care), think about the challenges and difficulties that life has handed this child from no fault of their own. This is a good practice whenever you start to feel disconnected or resentful.

**2) Actively affirm the child**

Another thing parents can do is affirm the child in the midst of his misbehavior. This may be difficult to do, but it can help your child break the revenge habit. You can say something like, “I don’t like what you said, but I still love you.” Remind yourself that your child’s hurtful behaviors or comments are not personal. Try to see them as reflective of the true struggles in his heart. Use the pain and hurt you feel as means to understanding the pain and hurt he is feeling.

**3) Don’t punish**

Parents will also want to avoid consequences that are retaliative in nature. Taking away your son’s favorite toy for breaking his sister’s favorite doll may seem like a logical consequence that can be very appropriate in some circumstances for some children. However, for these children it is best to avoid any consequence or punishment that can be interpreted as retaliation.

Instead, focus on having the child make amends. He can do chores around the house to pay for a new doll or he can sell some of his toys to make enough money for the purchase. Building and supporting intra-sibling relationships is an important task for parents of revenge-focused children.

**4) Make time to connect and engage**

Spending quality time with a revenge-oriented child (even if they reject or resist your advances) is very important. Shutting him out because of his behaviors will only confirm what he feels about himself. Seek to find shared interests and activities and proactively engage in them, even if he resists. Unconditional love and strong parent-child relationship is the bridge to healing for these children.