

## trouble-makers

What to do when your child is attracted to a bad influence.

SHANNON YERXA'S SON ZAKK HAD A PRISTINE TRACK record at school—he followed the rules and was rarely flagged for misbehaviour. Yerxa, a mom of three kids in Calgary, describes her son as a sensitive child with “a calming energy.” So she was stunned when Zakk, then seven, was kept inside for recess after breaking a cafeteria rule, along with two friends. “Zakk doesn’t like to get into trouble,” she says. “It was really out of character for him.”

The following year, when he was in grade three, Zakk got into a physical fight with one of the boys from the cafeteria incident. “I never thought Zakk would hit someone. I almost dropped to the ground when I heard about it,” Yerxa recalls. “Even the teacher was shocked. We realized he must have been pushed too far.”

Yerxa had been growing wary of her son’s relationship with the other boy already, so she told her son it was time to stop hanging out with him. “I don’t like to intervene too much, but in this situation it was causing Zakk problems in school,” she says.

Many parents have found themselves grappling with the same issue: What do you do when your child befriends the class troublemaker?

Karen Skinulis, a parenting expert and director of the Ontario Parenting Education Centre, suggests trying to understand why your otherwise rule-abiding kid is attracted to the bad influence at school. “Sometimes the kids who misbehave the most end up becoming a magnet for other kids,” Skinulis says. “Some kids think that by being next to a child like that, there will be fun and excitement.” Because mischief-makers and instigators tend to receive a lot of attention, other students may feel they’ll also get attention by hanging out with them. “Children may not process negative attention the same way an adult processes it—I think kids respond in a more emotional way. Maybe there’s something about the friendship that, in some way, meets some kind of need.”

Between ages six and eight, kids are exploring limits and who they are within their peer group, says Karen Hoffman, a parent counsellor and Canadian Certified Family Educator in Vancouver. Obedient kids may be



intrigued by a rule-breaker. “If a kid follows all the rules at home and at school, he may think, ‘Maybe I don’t have to do that,’” she says.

Just because your child befriends a disruptive classmate doesn’t mean he’ll turn into a troublemaker, too, says Hoffman, or that the two will remain friends into adolescence. She suggests gently guiding your child rather than overtly telling him or her what to do. “When we say ‘no,’ those kids may become more appealing. Children almost have to come to the conclusion themselves.” Ask questions that propel your child to arrive at his own decision (see sidebar).

Skinulis also recommends using open-ended questions, so that your child doesn’t feel as though he’s being criticized or controlled. Ask him how he feels when he’s around the other kid, or what he likes about him. She also recommends encouraging kids to act as a positive influence over misbehaving classmates. Brainstorm together how your child might help a disobedient kid become more co-operative (like trying not to laugh at disruptive antics). This builds self-esteem by helping your child feel as if he can handle difficult problems on his own. The only time a parent should intervene directly (with the school or with the other parent) is if there’s an element of bullying, says Skinulis.

Rather than ban playdates with the bad influence, view them as opportunities to observe the friendship, says Skinulis. “The child may have certain qualities and strengths. It could help you see why your child likes him.” —STACEY STEIN

### WHAT TO SAY

Try these prompts to discuss a peer’s bad behaviour with your child:

- \* “What do you think of the way she behaved during the field trip? How do you think the other kids felt about it?”
- \* “When your friend was here for a playdate, I found it difficult to get her to follow the rules. Why do you think this happened?”
- \* “What steps should we take if we want her to come back for another playdate?”