Behavior at school

Many behavior problems in school settings are rooted not in “bad intentions,” but rather in underlying emotional or cognitive difficulties. For example, children showing signs of or diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) — or with “ADHD-type” attention, self-regulation or executive-function deficits — often struggle in school. Compared with their peers, children with ADHD have been shown to present significantly more emotional and behavioural difficulties, including problems with attention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, conduct, peer relationships, and emotional regulation.

Moreover, even at pre-school age, children with attention or self-regulation challenges may already show deficits in “activity-level regulation” and “executive functions” (skills like planning, impulse control, working memory, flexible thinking), which are critical for adapting to the structured demands of school.

Emotional challenges — anxiety, poor emotional regulation, internal distress — can also underlie misbehavior. When children face anxiety, emotional dysregulation or social/emotional difficulties (for example after stress, family adversities, neglect, or bullying), their capacity to concentrate, cooperate, and follow classroom rules may suffer. In some cases, these issues lead to externalizing behaviour (acting out, disruptiveness), in others internalizing behaviour (withdrawal, anxiety, depression), but either way may manifest in school as “misbehavior,” poor social interaction skills, aggressive tendencies, or academic underperformance.

To summarize: when a child’s brain, emotions or social-psychological context make learning and self-regulation difficult, what may look like “misbehavior” is often their way of coping — or the result of being overwhelmed.

How this dynamic affects school performance, social relationships, and long-term development

When a child’s emotional or cognitive needs are not addressed, the misbehavior tends to have ripple effects beyond the occasional “incident.” Several studies have documented how emotional issues and cognitive challenges interfere with everyday functioning: children with ADHD (or ADHD-type difficulties) often show impairments in academic performance, peer relationships, social competence, classroom engagement, and general well-being.

Family circumstances also matter. In a study with school-aged children, researchers found that adverse conditions such as social vulnerability, chronic stress, or maternal depression significantly predicted behavioral problems in children. Another study comparing behavior in school and home contexts showed that children who have

problems in both settings tend to have lower social competence and poorer academic outcomes than those whose difficulties are limited to just school or home alone.

Hence, the combination of internal vulnerabilities (cognitive, emotional) and external stressors or unsupportive environments can create a cycle: difficulties lead to misbehavior, misbehavior leads to negative feedback (exclusion, frustration), which deepens emotional distress, undermines self-esteem, and further impairs learning and social adaptation. Without intervention, this may result in long-term disengagement, underachievement, or more serious behavioral or mental health issues.

However, not all misbehavior stems from cognitive skills deficiency. A child may choose to test limits as a response to joining a social environment or to the differences that belie the two environments, home and school. Schools, especially Montessori environments, often have limits clearly set; a child may embark on a limit testing journey to be reassured where those limits exist in all environments. Extreme care is then due on the part of the child's adults; teachers and parents working in partnership is then more important than ever.

How home support and parental/family involvement can help — pathways to prevention and improvement

Because children's emotional and cognitive struggles are often intertwined with their behavior, supportive home environments and informed parenting can play a crucial role in preventing or mitigating school behavior challenges. Research suggests that perceived social support — from family, peers, or school — can significantly reduce children's behavioral problems.

Parents who adopt warm, communicative, consistent, and empathetic parenting styles — rather than harsh, critical, or overly strict styles — tend to foster better emotional regulation, fewer attention difficulties, and lower anxiety or hyperactivity in children. In contrast, parenting characterized by rejection, criticism, or inconsistent discipline is associated with higher likelihood of attention problems, emotional dysregulation, and behavioral issues.

Moreover, when home support includes structure (regular routines, predictable expectations), emotional support (open communication, empathy), and social support (feeling accepted, safe, understood), children are better able to cope with school demands. Studies show that children with stable family support and positive parent-child relationships have lower risk of behavior problems, even when other risk factors (cognitive difficulties, school stress) exist. Parental relationship also plays a significant role in the child's developing emotional adaptation and resilience.

When parents understand that misbehavior may stem from cognitive or emotional struggles — not willful mischief — they can respond with patience, guidance, and constructive support (rather than punishment). Such informed parenting can improve self-regulation, emotional awareness, and social skills over time, helping the child succeed academically and socially.

What this means for educators and parents — recommendations and directions

- **Assess underlying difficulties**: When a child misbehaves, consider whether there may be emotional or cognitive factors at play (attention problems, self-regulation deficits, anxiety, home stress). Rather than punishing, seek to understand root causes and — if needed — involve specialists (psychologists, educational therapists).
- **Promote supportive, stable home and school environments**: Consistent routines, clear expectations, emotional availability and empathetic communication help children feel safe, understood, and capable of managing demands.
- **Collaborate between home and school**: Parents and teachers working together — sharing observations, strategies, and support — can provide more coherent, reinforcing structures for the child. Especially when cognitive or emotional difficulties are present, a team approach reduces fragmentation and gives the child more stable support.
- **Teach self-regulation skills explicitly**: Children benefit from learning emotion-regulation, impulse control, planning, and organizational skills — moving beyond punishment/discipline to skills building. Parenting and teaching strategies that support these skills (structure + warmth + consistency) can make a real difference.
- **Recognize and validate emotional struggles**: Misbehavior may express internal distress — anxiety, frustration, feeling overwhelmed, or difficulties with social relationships. Help the child name and understand feelings; offer comfort, empathy, and coping strategies.

Resources

Emotional/Behavioural Problems and Functional Impairment in Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32994375/

A systematic review of the emotional, behavioural and cognitive features exhibited by school-aged children experiencing neglect or emotional abuse: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25733080/

Problemas de Comportamento, Competência Social e Desempenho Acadêmico: Um Estudo Comparativo de Crianças no Ambiente Escolar e Familiar: https://www.scielo.br/j/tpsy/a/rDLr9wSNNT6Jf5k3jRvVyTs/abstract/?lang=pt

The impact of perceived social support on children's problem behaviors: the parallel mediating roles of attentional bias: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394322049_The_impact_of_perceived_social_support_on_children's_problem_behaviors_the_parallel_mediating_roles_of_attentional_bias

Family, learning disabilities and behavior problems in schoolchildren: https://www.scielo.br/j/er/a/hZc8jnYNJDsW9tFMP3tbBjd/abstract/?lang=pt