

# Handling an Attention-Seeking Child

"Mommy, come here and see my picture."  
"It's very nice, Sarah."  
"I can't find the blue crayon."  
"It's right here."  
"I can't find the green one."  
"Here it is."  
"I don't want to color. I want to paint."  
"I'll get your paint set."  
"Will you paint this flower for me, Mommy?"

It's normal for children to need attention and approval. However, attention-seeking becomes a problem when it happens all the time. Even charming attention-seeking can become controlling. Many children make tragedies out of trivial concerns to get your sympathy. Excessive attention-seeking results in a situation where your child commands your life.

Many children misbehave to get attention. The most notorious reason for misbehavior in young children, this can be the seed for discipline problems in later childhood and adolescence.

Your goal is not to eliminate your child's need for attention and approval. When handled correctly, your child's need for attention can be a helpful tool for improving your child's behavior. Eliminate not the need for attention, but those attention-seeking behaviors that are excessive or unacceptable. A mother who says, "Sarah, I know that you want me to stay and paint with you. I am busy now. If you can be patient and paint by yourself for ten minutes, I'll be able to spend some time with you then," is giving Sarah an opportunity to have the attention that she wants and needs. She is not giving in to nagging.

## **How Much Attention Is Too Much?**

That depends on you. How much attention-seeking can you tolerate? The rule is that children will seek as much attention as you give them. You must strike a balance between how much your children want and how much you can give. Even normal attention-seeking can drive you crazy on some days.

Do not let your children's need for attention turn into demands for attention. When children do not get enough attention, they resort to outbursts, tantrums, nagging, teasing, and other annoying behaviors. They think, "If I can't get attention by being good, then I'll misbehave to get Mom's attention."

## **Three Kinds of Attention**

Adult attention and approval are among the strongest rewards for children. Unfortunately, parents seldom use attention wisely. There are three kinds of attention:

- Positive Attention
- Negative Attention
- No Attention

When you give your children attention and approval for being well behaved, they are getting positive attention. Positive attention means catching children being good. Focus on positive behavior. Positive attention can be words of praise or encouragement, closeness, hugs, or a pat on the back. A pleasant note in your child's lunch box works well. Positive attention increases good behavior.

When you give your child attention for misbehavior, you are giving negative attention. Negative attention typically begins when you become upset. You follow with threats, interrogation, and lectures. Negative attention is not a punishment; it is a reward. Negative attention does not punish misbehavior, but increases it.

What is the easiest way to capture your attention-sitting quietly or misbehaving? When children do not receive attention in a positive way, they will get your attention any way they can. Do not pay attention to misbehaviors. Pay attention to good behavior. Avoid this scenario:

Jeremy and Dominic are sitting quietly and watching Saturday-morning cartoons for thirty minutes. Everything is peaceful. Dad is working on the computer. Suddenly, an argument erupts: "It's my turn to pick a show." Dad charges into the room. He turns off the television, scolds the two children, and sends them to their rooms.

For thirty minutes, these children were well behaved. Dad said nothing to them about how well they were doing. Nothing was said about how quiet they were. Nothing was said about how well they were cooperating. The moment there was trouble, Dad was instantly mobilized. Dad did not give them any positive attention while they were being good. When they began misbehaving, Dad rushed in with plenty of negative attention.

Negative attention teaches children how to manipulate and get their way. They learn to be troublesome. They learn how to interrupt you. They learn how to control you. Negative attention teaches children how to tease, nag, and annoy. It teaches children to aggravate, irritate, and exasperate. We teach this by not paying attention to our children when they are behaving appropriately, and by paying attention to them when they are misbehaving.

I have worked with hundreds of parents who have taught their children to be negative attention seekers. I have never met a parent who taught this deliberately. When you attend to the negative and ignore the positive, you teach your children to behave in a negative way. Your child will misbehave to get your attention in the future.

Do not wait for misbehavior to happen. Do not take good behavior for granted. We do this with teenagers. We come to expect good behavior, and overlook their efforts. When a child demonstrates good behavior, notice it. Look for it. The more you notice, the more you will find. You will get more good behavior in the future. Anyone can catch children being bad. Turn this around. Catch them being good. It's not easy. It takes practice.

Statistics show that the average American parent spends seven minutes a week with each of their children. Do better than average. Telling your children that you love them is not enough. Show them that you love them. Spend ten minutes of quality time with each child every day. No excuses, like I was just too busy today, or I didn't have time. We are all too busy.

In many families, both parents work. Some parents work two jobs. Your most important job is being a parent. When you come home after work, give the first thirty minutes to your children. Do not be the parents whose only hour with their daughter this week was in the principal's office or at the police station. Write your children into your plan book. Make an appointment with each of your

children every day. Go for a walk and listen to what is happening in their lives. Turn off the TV for an hour and talk.

### **How to Ignore**

When you ignore misbehaviors, you are giving no attention. Because attention is rewarding to children, withholding attention can be an effective punishment. Withholding attention can weaken a misbehavior. When your child misbehaves to get your attention, ignore the misbehavior. Ignore your child's inappropriate demands for attention. You will weaken those demands and extinguish the misbehavior.

Some parents find this hard to believe; they think that if a child is misbehaving, he must be punished. This is not true. Ignoring demands for attention is the best cure. When you ignore consistently, you will teach your child that these misbehaviors are not paid off with attention. Temper tantrums need an audience. Take the audience away, and there is no point to having a tantrum. Do not forget to redirect. Teach children appropriate ways to get attention. "My ears do not listen to whining. Please ask in a soft voice."

### **When to Ignore**

Ignoring does not mean ignoring the problem. It means ignoring demands for negative attention. There are many misbehaviors that you should not ignore. Some misbehaviors should be punished. Deciding when to ignore or when to punish is not easy, and there are no exact rules. It takes timing and judgment. When your child misbehaves to get attention, ignore it. If your child does not stop in two or three minutes, give him a reminder. Tell your child, "I do not respond to whining. When you stop, we'll talk." Wait another minute or two. If he still does not stop, then tell your child to stop or he will be punished: "Stop now, or you will go to time-out."

If you get angry or let your child push your buttons, you lose. If you must use a punishment, dispense the punishment without anger. If you get angry, then your child has succeeded in getting the negative attention that he was after. If you feel yourself getting angry, walk away. Cool off. If you give in, you will be providing your child with an attention payoff. You will be rewarding a misbehavior.

Do not take good behavior for granted: give your children positive attention when they are behaving. Ignore demands for attention such as teasing and whining; giving in to these demands encourages children to misbehave to get attention. Understanding these ideas is easy, but practicing them is difficult. You are worth it. Make the commitment. Your children are worth it, too.

Read more on FamilyEducation: <https://www.familyeducation.com/life/discipline-strategies/handling-attention-seeking-child>