

Attention seeking Behaviour:

Why do young children seek attention in ways that can be so annoying? And why do we, as parents, give in so often?

There are many reasons kids seek attention: they're bored, tired, hungry, or in need of quality time with their parents. But the reasons your child acts this way aren't as important as learning how to respond when they do.

Keep in mind that such attention-seeking behaviour is normal. Children in the 3- to 7-year-old age range are simply not able to distinguish between needs and wants. And they often don't know how to articulate themselves without being annoying. It's a developmental problem. So, for these kids, the easiest method of communicating is to engage in attention-seeking behaviour—usually loudly and frequently - but don't despair!

Do Be Empathetic

For young kids, approach the problem of annoying behaviour with empathy. Empathy doesn't mean that you completely understand your child's behaviour. Rather, it means that you know it's coming from a place of developmental immaturity.

Yes, it can be hard to muster up empathy and kindness when your child is acting obnoxious. But once you understand their developmental level, you will know what they are and are not capable of handling, and you will be able to respond more appropriately.

Do Learn to Ignore Your Child When Necessary

Sometimes you need to ignore your child when they bother you for attention. This is not to say that you should always ignore every aspect of your child's attention-seeking behaviour. But it is okay to tell your child that whining will not get them what they want and that you will only speak to them when they can speak calmly.

Do Explain to Your Child What an Emergency Is

Explain to your child the difference between (1) a real emergency (where your immediate attention is warranted), and (2) something that your child wants but isn't urgent. For instance, if the sink is overflowing upstairs, or a sibling has just escaped out the front door, those are real emergencies, and your immediate attention is needed. However, if your child wants to show you a video, and you're talking on the phone, that's not an emergency. They can wait for your attention in that instance.

Here's a helpful tip: have a plan in place that allows your child to signal when something is truly important. Developing a catchphrase for them to say in a real emergency (for example, "code red") helps your child learn to differentiate between a real emergency and simply wanting your attention.

Do Display the Rules for Your Child

One of the best ways to stop attention-seeking behaviour in its tracks is to let your child know your expectations and what behaviours they need to avoid. You can do this by creating a rules chart. Have them help you create it, and then hang it at their eye level (the refrigerator is a good place for it). Even if your child doesn't read, just looking at the chart will serve as a reminder of the agreed-upon rules.

Here are a few examples of what can go on the chart: no whining, no screaming, and no running away when called. Next to each rule, list the consequence. For instance, sit by yourself for 5 minutes, go to bed 10 minutes earlier, or lose electronics time.

Of course, your child will break the rules at times—that happens. But when the rules are listed where your child can see them, you can then point and say, "Sorry, no screaming is on the rules list. No television tonight."

Do Be Consistent with Consequences

The biggest hurdle parents face in stopping attention-seeking behaviour stems from not consistently enforcing the consequences when their child acts out. Too often, parents are tired, frustrated, or just want their child to be quiet. In short, they're burnt out, so they give in rather than enforce the rules through consistent consequences.

While giving in if you're burnt out is understandable, make no mistake about it: your child is taking mental notes each time you yield to their demands. And the next time they want something, they'll redouble their attention-seeking efforts to get it.

Do Give your Child Healthy Attention

Make sure you are giving your child a healthy amount of attention. Giving attention doesn't mean meeting all of your child's demands at every turn. Rather, it means engaging with them consistently and lovingly each day. Healthy attention can come in the form of quality playtime, reading together, eating family meals and talking about your day, doing homework or school activities with them, and having a consistent bedtime routine.

Each day will be different in terms of how much attention you can give your child. Your busy schedule will dictate how much time you can spend, so be realistic about what you are capable of giving.

And give yourself a break if you feel guilty about not giving enough—no one wins if you berate yourself for not fitting everything in.

Don't Yell Back at Your Child

It is very tempting to reduce your emotional responses to your child's level, especially when the whining doesn't stop, or you're tired and at your wits' end. Try to have a plan in place for removing yourself from the situation when you feel like you might explode.

If your child doesn't end the attention-seeking behaviour, say to them: "I need a time-out right now because you won't stop whining. I'll be back in 5 minutes."

Then go to your quiet place and practice some relaxation and deep breathing exercises until you are calm enough to deal with your child.

Don't Make Your Child Feel Guilty

Juggling the responsibilities of kids, work, and life in general leaves many parents feeling chronically exhausted and overworked. As such, it can be tempting to guilt our kids into good behaviour by unloading our difficulties (an unreasonable

boss, a stressful encounter with a neighbour, a fight with a co-parent) onto them.

But the issues adults face should not be shared with our kids. Kids already deal with enough stress and anxiety of their own, and it's not fair to burden them with your problems as well. There's nothing wrong with your child knowing that you feel exhausted, but you should skip all the gory details. Just say to your child: "I've had a busy day and have a headache. So, I'd like you to stop whining, or you will have to sit by yourself."

Don't Assume There Is Something Wrong with Your Child

Many parents mistakenly believe that their young child's attention-seeking behaviours signify that there is a bigger problem, and they panic.

On the contrary, most kids will act out at some point in their development—and that's okay. It doesn't mean that there is something wrong with your child. As a parent, you should expect this behaviour during childhood and respond to it with effective consequences so that, over time, your child learns how to behave appropriately when they are frustrated or want attention.

Of course, if you are following these suggestions and still have concerns, or if your child is acting out in ways that are dangerous to themselves or others, contact your paediatrician immediately. Don't ignore your parental intuitions if something doesn't seem right.

Don't Hover Over Your Child

You don't have to be present every time your child needs something. Don't feel guilty or fear that your child will feel unloved if you don't always respond to attention-seeking behaviour. Just know that part of good parenting is teaching your child that not all of their needs can be met. If you are always on-call whenever your child needs something, your child will never learn the value of patience, the importance of waiting their turn, and the understanding that they're not the centre of the universe.

Parents that hover over their kids run the risk of reinforcing the attention-seeking behaviour, and the child may carry these behaviours into adulthood.

Conclusion

Attention-seeking behaviour can be annoying and difficult for parents to handle. Indeed, it can take the pleasure out of parenting altogether. Just remember that this is a perfectly normal stage of a young child's development, and if you follow these do's and don'ts, your child's behaviour will improve—and you will enjoy being a parent again