

Paying Attention So Attention Pays Off

All kids love attention. They like to see adults excited and noticing what they are doing. Lucky most of the time kids do nice things to get their parents to notice them, like coloring pictures, creating games, or generally being silly and playful.

Sometimes parents don't pay enough attention to positive kid behavior but quickly react to negative behavior. Because kids like attention so much, this accidentally leads to negative behavior more often. The bad behavior "worked" – it got a reaction from others.

Because kids like adult attention so much, parents can help kids behave well by using their attention wisely. Here's how to make sure that paying attention pays off:

Strategic Ignoring

That's not nice! I'm outta here! Many bad behavior kids do are annoying, like whining, pouting, crying, and tantrums. Parents are often tempted to verbally correct, scold, or reason with kids these behaviors happen. However, this accidentally gives attention to the negative behavior.

Instead, negative behavior that is annoying or obnoxious should get as little attention as possible.

- Figure out what behaviors to ignore. Behaviors that might be motivated to get reactions from you are often "verbal" in nature (e.g., whining, pouting, swearing, cursing, tantrums without physical acting out) and by reacting to them, parents are adding "fuel to the fire."
- Ignore behavior you don't like. This involves
 - Turning your back when your child swears
 - Not arguing with your child when she talks back
 - Setting a limit and then enforcing it without answering your child's question about why (or answering it only once!)
 - Being okay with letting your child scream in the grocery store line because he wants a candy bar and NOT giving it to him or repeatedly scolding him.

Special Attention

Wow, I really like that. Do more! Of course, ignoring negative behavior is only one part of how to use attention. Parents can really make the most of their attention by making sure they comment on positive behaviors.

- Catch your child being good. Look for any chance you can to notice positive behavior that you would like to see continue or more of from your child. When your child behaves this way, make sure you acknowledge it some how (e.g., praise, pats on the head).
- Stop what you're doing to give your child attention. When parents are doing tasks, like talking on the phone or paying bills, kids may not get much attention. But, if kids start misbehaving, they get attention right away. Instead, you should stop what you are doing from time to time when your child is behaving and give some attention.

- Use physical touch. Giving hugs, kisses, pats on the back, tussles of the hair, and sitting close gives your child positive attention.

What To Expect

- Expect that your child will want to do more and more things to get positive reactions. You are teaching your child what behavior you like and strengthening the parent-child bond. When children feel closer to their parents, they want to do more to please them.
- Expect that it is hard to catch your child being good. Many parents see times when their child is playing quietly or generally behaving as “me time.” Instead, it’s the perfect time to give your child some positive attention.
- Expect negative behavior to get worse before it gets better. By not reacting to negative behavior, you are making a change that your child will notice. Nobody really likes change, and so we react. Your child will try harder with whining, pouting, or tantrums to see what it takes to get you to react. **Don’t Give In!** If you can make it through this test, you will be better off in the long run.
- Keep everyone safe! Not all behavior can be ignored. Unsafe or dangerous behavior, like hitting or running away, can’t be ignored.

Remember

Behaviors you like	—————>	Lots of attention!
Behaviors you don’t like	—————>	Little or no attention
Unsafe or serious behaviors	—————>	Keep everyone safe (Time Out)

Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health professional if needed.

Prepping for Success

To be ready to use attention the best, parents should think about what behaviors they want to praise, what behaviors they want to ignore, and what behaviors can't be ignored. Filling in the worksheet below will help parents be ready when the time comes to use these skills!

Behaviors my child does that can be ignored: Write down the very specific behaviors your child does that you find annoying, obnoxious or otherwise irritating that you think may really be about getting reactions from others or testing limits:

What will "ignoring" look like?: Write down what you will do. Will you turn your back, will you walk a few steps away? Will you act like nothing is going on? Will you give one warning (e.g, "I can't help you when you whine like that") and then ignore?

What behaviors can't be ignored?: Write down the behaviors your child does that you think are too unsafe or hurtful to be ignored, or aren't really about getting a reaction so ignoring won't work (for example, ignoring a child who is getting into a cookie jar probably won't work because he's not getting in the jar to see your reaction. He's doing it to get the cookie!)
