

Look at Me! Supporting children with attention seeking behaviours

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Attention seeking behaviours in children and young people are some of the most challenging for teachers to deal with. Here Michael Jones speaks to Nigel Mellors educational psychologist and author of several books on the subject.

Michael Jones: *What are the roots of attention seeking? Before reading your books I was inclined to blame the parents for not giving the children enough attention. Is this a common perception?*

Nigel Mellor: To begin with, my heart goes out to parents facing such difficulties. My work has always been to support them in dealing with what is one of the most frustrating challenges we can ever face. Of course we all want and need attention, but what we are looking at here is excessive and inappropriate behaviours. The phrase "attention seeking" should only really be reserved for severe cases.

There has been almost no research into the topic of how it all starts and how families go down different pathways, and why in some cases attention seeking remains at a low level and in other cases it escalates out of control. But children who show excessive and inappropriate attention seeking actually receive high levels of both positive and negative attention from adults. The adults are usually desperate to solve the problem but find themselves trapped in a vicious circle, where their own strength (their concern for the child) becomes their fatal weakness. My best guess is that children who have been generally overlooked at home will respond quite well simply to a bit more positive attention from their parents. They have not entered the terribly demanding cycle of sucking adults dry of all and any attention, (positive or negative), yet remaining unsatisfied.

One common trigger seems to be the birth of a second child who takes up all of mum and dad's time. The first child then quickly discovers that misbehaviour brings back the missing parental attention.

There may have been attachment problems, or here may be other triggers, such as illness, family stress etc. or simply being "lost" in a big family. Curiously, there has been almost no research into the roots of attention seeking. My own approach is to say, "That's all water under the bridge. We can't turn the clock back. Dwelling on the past just heaps up feelings of guilt. What is more important is what we do today."

MJ: *Is there a difference in the behaviour of children who are in a relationship with adults who do not provide enough attention, as opposed to those whose behaviour emerges following what you describe as a 'trigger'?*

NM: Paradoxically, attention seeking often arises when we try too hard to be good parents! Now, in some extreme cases (such as terribly neglected children in orphanages) the prime need is simply to provide the children with an appropriate loving relationship. Any desperate attention seeking they may display (or "frozen watchfulness" or self-stimulation or other signs of neglect and poor self-esteem) should not be tackled on its own as "a problem". Neglect in family settings should again reinforce the need to simply provide loving attention. Such cases, thankfully, are rare.

The families I mainly deal with involve parents who are actually desperately concerned about their children. They are trying their hardest but nothing seems to work. The more they do, the worse the situation becomes. The children are often actually receiving massive attention: but the wrong kind at the wrong time.

MJ: We might assume that children with attention seeking behaviour just need to have more positive attention from adults in school. Why do children often respond negatively to this?

NM: It's a bit more complicated than that. Children at home may have fallen into the habit of gaining attention through misbehaviour (as parents we usually give massive amounts of attention when we tell children off). The children may of course also be receiving some attention for positive behaviour, but it usually doesn't compare to the amount they receive when being irritating. Their daily experience is that being a nuisance works: it brings attention. It's not the punishment they want, or the telling off, but all the fuss that surrounds it. And negative attention is better than none.

When we begin a programme, at home or at school, usually the first response is that the child's behaviour gets worse. But that's in fact a sign that the programme is working! The programme involve two parts – like a pair of scissors, you need both blades to cut. One “blade” is dealing with the misbehaviour. This involves carefully planned, selective ignoring coupled with firm, quick, low-key punishments. Both of these are incredibly difficult to do well for a host of reasons, as I explain in my books.

The other “blade” involves praise and rewards for acceptable behaviours. But again, most strangely, this is much harder than it sounds. The impact of our praise rarely matches the attention that arises from our annoyance over misbehaviour.

At the start of the programme, the first thing the child usually notices is a reduction in attention as the adults begin to learn to ignore things more effectively. But right at the start there will usually have been little opportunity to provide positive attention to counterbalance this. So the child tries what they know has always worked in the past – the adults are not responding when they fidget scream and run round, so they do it all the more, until the adults do respond! Parents and teachers have to stick to their guns and live through this period. Eventually the positive attention (praise and other rewards) will start to have an effect.

MJ: *We may associate attention seeking with obviously disruptive activities like calling out in class. However in your books you mention children who 'sulk' and won't respond when asked what is wrong with them, and children who always need lots of help with work. What is happening here?*

NM: These illustrate one of the weird paradoxes of attention seeking. Children use the adults' strength against them. The better the parent or teacher you are, the more vulnerable you become!

Almost any behaviour you can imagine can be used to get attention. Usually it is obvious silly, irritating behaviours that are used – such as running around or screaming or fidgeting. But if, for example, you are a bright child, with a dedicated teacher, one the best ways to get attention is to NOT WORK! That dedicated teacher will naturally rush right over. The teacher's very strength - her concern - becomes her fatal weakness, as she falls into the child's 'trap'. It's not that the children are “evil” and plan this – they just stumble over the trick.

So being unusually quiet, feeling ill, being upset or scared of the dark, struggling with reading ... all these can be used to 'trap' the most caring of teachers and parents. The job of the psychologist is to spot the pattern and see whether a reading problem or an illness or a communication difficulty etc is "genuine", or whether it is part of an attention-seeking ploy.

MJ: *How effective are your strategies and how do teachers respond to your ideas?*

NM: The work involves two careful steps: assessment of the problem, then intervention. When you are so close to the situation, as are teachers or parents, you cannot see what is going on. Emotions are high – remember these are adults trying their hardest and everything they do seems to make it worse.

Part of my job as psychologist is to be able to take a step back and observe the interactions objectively. We take information from as many sources as possible. Then, with a triangle of intervention focused on the parents, the child and the teachers all together, we can usually provide a successful package that works well. There are examples in the long-term follow-up case studies in 'The Good the Bad and the Irritating' (Mellor, 2000).

MJ: *What are the main ingredients for success in schools when children display attention seeking behaviour?*

NM: Intervention requires a co-ordinated effort from all the adults involved. This can be particularly difficult in high schools, where children can 'find the cracks' in the system. One key ingredient of success, however, is simply to understand how attention seeking works as an *interaction*, and believe that it is not a medical problem that sits "within the child". It is important to persist with a carefully planned, individualised programme over many weeks.

MJ: *I recall working with children with special needs, who had extremely challenging attention-seeking behaviour. Are the strategies you suggest for children in mainstream school applicable to children with severe additional needs?*

NM: Very much so. For example, I spent a great deal of time working in schools for children with both moderate and severe learning difficulties. At the end of the day, all children pretty much figure out the same tricks (there are some examples in my books). Even babies a few months old can learn to control their parents! Having additional special needs may complicate the intervention somewhat, but the underlying principles of managing attention seeking behaviour don't really change.

MJ: *You have recently written about attention seeking and AD/HD (Mellor, 2009) are the two linked?*

NM: Attention seeking can masquerade as almost any condition imaginable. AD/HD is an obvious example. All the behaviours common within ADHD can also be employed to gain attention. One way to tell the two apart is to come at the problem from the attention-seeking angle. Attention seeking will almost invariably involve a range of *additional* behaviours that are not typical of ADHD. These might include seeing ghosts, feigning illness, constantly painting their hair purple, regularly standing in front of the TV when your parents' favourite programme is on, repeatedly belching and so on. These are persistent behaviours designed to be irritating and to get attention.

They do not readily fit the ADHD patterns of impulsivity, poor concentration and overactivity. The article covers a number of other aspects to take into account. A key question to ask is “What does the child gain from behaving this way?”

MJ: *Briefly, what advice would you give to a parent or teacher with a child with attention seeking behaviour?*

NM: First, remember that if you didn't care about the children, you wouldn't get these problems. Second, this is the most difficult behaviour problem to handle, as your normal techniques seem to work against you - the more you punish them, the more they do it. Parents and teachers think they are going crazy. Third, the approach takes time, yet all the elements of it seem so easy and obvious. And that's the fatal flaw. It's not that you have been doing anything wrong, it's just that your techniques have to be 100% right. The children are so adult- focused they spot any chink in your strategy. For example, if you think you are ignoring then think again. It's written all over your face and in your body language that you are giving attention. Children can read you like a book.

Finally, praise is your “strongest weapon”. And we don't use it enough. Typically we might give two or three words of matter-of-fact, low key praise for good behaviour, when what we need to do is to “pile on the praise”.

Michael Jones is an educational writer and researcher.

References

Mellor, N (2000) *The Good, the Bad and the Irritating: A practical approach for parents of children who are attention seeking.*
(Lucky Duck Publishing)

Mellor, N (2008) *Attention Seeking: A complete guide for teachers (Second Edition)* (Lucky Duck Publishing)

Mellor, N (2009) *Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or attention seeking? Ways of distinguishing two common childhood problems.*
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The course 'Managing Attention-Seeking Behaviour' for teachers and Teaching Assistants will run several times this year in a number of different venues. For more information see www.osiriseducational.co.uk

To find out more about Nigel Mellor's work visit www.nmellor.com