

The Importance of Positive Attention

Children misbehave at home and in the school classroom for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they don't understand the expectations for appropriate behavior and sometimes they are not developmentally ready to conform to the expectations. And sometimes children misbehave because any kind of attention, even if it is negative, is better than no attention at all.

Everyone likes to be noticed. As we move through the various contexts of our lives, be it the family, the classroom, the workplace, or the social gathering, we want to be recognized as an individual person. It's not a very pleasant feeling to spend time in a social group and leave feeling as if no one knew we had been there. For some people, getting noticed comes easily and naturally. Some people, for example, are good storytellers, possess a rich sense of humor, or know a good deal about a topic of interest to the group as whole. Any one of these characteristics helps bring a person to the center of attention in the group.

There are people, on the other hand, who might not possess these types of characteristics and who, therefore, have more difficulty being noticed. This is certainly true for some children in the classroom. These children may not get the highest scores on tests, have a talent that is valued in the classroom, or find it easy to produce the behaviors that please the teacher. Some of these children find another way of getting attention, of being noticed - they misbehave. We might think that getting reprimanded or punished is something a child would want to avoid but for some children, the reprimand or punishment is a form of attention. For these children, some attention, any kind of attention, is better than none at all.

How should a teacher respond to this type of misbehavior? One approach is to remember the power of ignoring. If you believe that a child is misbehaving in order to gain attention, sometimes the best thing to do is simply ignore the behavior. Consider this scenario for example, A preschool child consistently resists ending his play activity to join the group at the table for snack. Instead of coming to the table, she goes over to the book area and finds a book to read. A teacher's usual response is to go over and sit next to the child and talk with her about the importance of following the rules and joining the rest of the children at snack. The result of the teacher's action may be the reinforcement of the exact behavior the teacher is trying to eliminate. Separating herself from the group has

produced a positive result for this child, the individual attention of the teacher. This positive result may lead the child to produce the very same behavior again in the future. In this circumstance, it might have been more effective for the teacher to ignore the child's behavior so that the behavior wasn't being reinforced.

The second approach for the teacher is to follow the often stated principle of "catch them being good." It is so easy for we adults, as parents or teachers, to fall into the habit of only acknowledging children's misbehavior. We can get so focused on when children break some rule that we don't realize how often they are actually being cooperative and helpful. We need to reflect on how we respond to children and make sure that we offer our praise and acknowledgement when they are being good citizens in the classroom (or at home). The child who is reprimanded for *not* cleaning up his place at the table after snack may be a child who *did* clean up his place at the table every other day that week but no one noticed. Acknowledging the positive behavior may eliminate a child's need to gain notice for the misbehavior.

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