

Attention Seeking Behaviour - Helpful Hints for Adults
(Summarised by Sophie Essam, Specialist Nurture Teacher at St Margaret's)

Attention seeking behaviour comes in many forms. Some behaviours are healthy such as asking if someone has time to talk, asking a friend to play, or waving to a parent from across the room. Other forms of attention seeking behaviour are not as healthy. *In children we often see hitting, biting, yelling, and interrupting. While these behaviours are not always attention seeking, and require professional support in some cases, they are commonly used as a way to receive attention.*

Over my years of working in behaviour, I have noticed a theme. Attention seeking behaviour is often dismissed and passed off. To this, (I say), *all humans need attention. It is a basic need. Adults and children both crave feeling seen, heard, and appreciated by others.*

What would happen if attention seeking behaviour was seen as *connection seeking* instead?

When children seek attention, they are *seeking to be seen and heard*. If children can't get this need met in positive ways, they will turn to other behaviours. Even those that come with consequences and punishments.

Timeouts, verbal reprimands, spanking, or other traditional methods of dealing with challenging attention seeking behaviour will not work. This is because these methods do not consider the reason of unmet need behind the behaviour. Many of these methods actually REINFORCE the challenging behaviour. The child learns that they can have their need for attention met by engaging in challenging behaviour, even if the attention is in the form of being yelled at, spanked, or punished.

Here are 3 ways to foster connection with children engaging in attention seeking behaviour:

1. Plan time with children.

Science shows us that *children who have access to "enriched attention" engage in much less challenging attention seeking behaviours.* As a parent, I know how hard it can be to give our children "enriched attention." We are often so tired and have low energy by the end of the day.

The important thing to know about "enriched attention" is that it doesn't have to mean hours on the floor playing lego (though it can be!). There are other *ways to give your child a sense of connection, including watching a show with them, reading stories, colouring, cooking dinner together, checking in with them, and occasionally asking them a question while they are playing independently.*

Being engaged with our children doesn't have to mean big outings or drawn out activities. It simply means being there and letting your children know that you notice them.

2. Catch the behaviour you want to see.

When children are engaging in challenging attention seeking behaviour, it can be hard to notice the times they ask for attention/connection in positive ways. Feeling overwhelmed and frustrated can prevent us from noticing the behaviour we want to see. As mentioned in the beginning of this article: *"Attention seeking behaviour refers to behaviour which results in the child gaining access to attention that wasn't there prior to the behaviour."*

If we want to see positive attention seeking behaviour, we need to give our children attention when this behaviour happens!

3. Teach new ways to ask for connection.

Seeking connection is a need that all humans have. Knowing how to ask for this connection is something that we learn through watching the world around us. This is why it is important to **model** new ways to ask for connection.

Find opportunities to ask for your child's attention in the same way you would like them to ask you. Modelling the behaviour we want to see is a very powerful tool to help your child learn new ways of seeking connection.