

Dealing with those pupils who crave recognition

Dr. Nigel Mellor explores approaches to a group of children who have been largely overlooked in the literature: attention seeking youngsters.

Dr Nigel Mellor is an educational psychologist working in North Tyneside, writing in a personal capacity. This article is based partly on his recent book *The Good, the Bad and the Irritating*.

Crawls under table. Shouts. Knocks pencils off table. Coughs. Scribbles on book. Whistles. Makes pig noises. Runs when told to walk. Snatches toys. Pulls models apart. Nips. Kicks. Waves arms about. Blows raspberries. Clicks tongue.

Stamps feet. Fiddles with other's belongings. Pulls pictures off the wall. Pokes tops off milk bottles. Throws coats on the floor. Mixes up coats on the pegs. Pinches bottoms.

Hits the vulnerable children. Snorts. Picks nose and puts it in other children's dinner. Spoils other's work. Fidgets. Makes funny noises. Runs off and grins all over face.

Takes toys from children. Pours own drink into other children's beakers. Makes frequent loud burps. Licks nose. Lies on back with legs in the air banging head on table. Soils. Whines. Hits head with hand.

Abridged from Mellor (2000) p53

What do all these have in common? The answer is, they bring massive amounts of attention: counselling, threats, punishments, advice, shouting, arguing, reasoning... and that is precisely what the attention seeking child thrives on.

Attention seeking has been little researched. It can be mistaken for almost any other difficulty such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There is no check list of "symptoms"; almost any behaviour could be part of an attention seeking cycle. The best guide is simply the adult's own feeling of intense irritation (for ways of distinguishing attention seeking from other problems, see Mellor 1997).

Attention seeking - dealing with the here and now.

Children behaving like this are almost impossible to ignore. Not that the child consciously plans these antics. What seems to happen is that a spiral escalates from some point in the past and gradually feeds on itself, as the attention seeking child is praised less and less and produces more and more irritating behaviour to attract attention - any kind, even negative attention. The crucial point, however, is not what began the spiral, but what to do about it *now*.

Dealing with this problem ideally needs a joint approach between home and nursery. However, the parents we work with may be feeling very upset and confused. The approach must be positive and practical and, above all, sensitive.

There is no “magic pill” solution, just careful strategies applied consistently. Some of these are familiar: ignoring, praising, punishing. Some may already be in use. The trick is both to get the balance right and to make them all effective, in nursery and at home.

Making techniques effective.

Ignoring, for example, sounds such a very obvious and simple procedure. But it's not. It is a skill which requires close analysis and practice. *The Good the Bad and the Irritating* explores this and other strategies in great depth from the parents' angle. An earlier book, *Attention Seeking : a practical solution for the classroom* considers a school perspective on the approach.

A classic problem with ignoring is the “one armed bandit” syndrome. We begin with good intentions and decide to ignore some minor, non dangerous but nevertheless, intensely irritating behaviours. We keep this up for a few days, then finally crack under the sustained pressure and react. This “pay-out”, even if it only happens occasionally, is all it takes to keep the child “hooked”- just like gamblers respond to a one armed bandit.

“Punishment” can backfire also. The pitfall here is that whatever tactics we use, they can inadvertently result in the child receiving even more attention (admittedly of a negative kind, but to the very attention seeking child, that is still welcome).

Parents often find this a particularly trying area. They may put off and put off, feeling reluctant to intervene firmly, but in the meantime shouting and arguing – that is, feeding in attention. Finally they may simply give up, or may eventually carry out a punishment which is unfortunately then wasted: drowned in the fuss that led up to it.

Praise and positive attention - what the child desperately needs - are often overlooked as we feel compelled to respond to the misbehaviours observed.

As an example, the following comments were made to James age four, in the space of a few minutes in play group (you can fill in the actual activities in your imagination). James was extremely attention seeking and could produce a wide range of annoying behaviours to get a response from staff. He received only one positive comment in this period.

James, you know you have to sit at the table Don't stick your tongue out Please leave the table James James, sit nicely please James, that's not nice Go and sit down. No no! Put your legs down James James, what have I asked you please? James, come on next door Don't push No James, leave that there James, just a minute James, don't put that there sweetheart No! I'll count to three. Everybody's waiting for you, James
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Staff in the play group attended a short course (based around Mellor 1997) and developed agreed strategies to handle his attention seeking. They implemented these as a team, aiming for consistency to be most effective.

However, tackling the issue through intervention at home can also be effective as the following case study shows (taken from Mellor 2000 p.59).

Case study

The head of his nursery referred Keith Frost at age four because of great concern about his behaviour. He had a terrible temper and was reported to have “bitten three children in half an hour”. There had been a number of tantrums in the nursery. He was seen to be a fairly able boy, to have a good imagination and to be quite happy to chat to adults.

According to Mrs Frost, Keith was a happy, fairly truthful but noisy and active boy who constantly chattered (this tended to get his mother down). He had, however, a good sense of humour. Unfortunately, as well as being stubborn, defiant and argumentative, he also liked a lot of his own way. He was however not too demanding and would willingly wait to have his wants satisfied.

Keith resented discipline and when tackled would indulge in minor temper tantrums. He had a tendency to show off but would often help in the house quite readily with small jobs and enjoyed praise. He was a sensitive child easily reduced to tears and made no effort to hide his feelings. If interested he could display a fair amount of patience and appeared to have confidence in himself. He was neat and quite enjoyed being tidy.

Relationships with brother and sister were rather poor because of his domineering and aggressive behaviour. This was also the case with other children outside the family.

Keith had no food fads but he would suck his thumb. He would also bite his toenails and his fingernails. This habit particularly annoyed his mother who responded by feeding in a great deal of attention. He was quite happy to go to bed early and did not wet the bed and was a calm, restful sleeper. Unfortunately, although he was able to dress himself he always dawdled in the mornings which provoked Mrs Frost to go on and on at him.

Management

Mrs Frost said that she lacked patience. She said that her approach was to “tell and tell” and then go on telling until in desperation she would resort to threats. She rarely, if ever, however carried these threats out. Her husband did not take any hand in disciplining the children.

Mrs Frost was quite receptive to suggestions that Keith was creaming off a large share of attention in the house (she had two other children all under school age) through a variety of irritating and annoying behaviour such as biting his nails, dawdling, arguing etc. It appeared that, also, some of his

activities in the nursery were equally effective in bringing him to the attention of the nursery staff.

It was clear that Mrs Frost had been trying hard to “be a good mother”. She had, quite unnecessarily, been worrying about the children having to go into care if she punished them. This had led her to try to avoid disciplining them at all. Unfortunately, in Keith’s case this had meant putting off the matter until it escalated out of all control. By that time she was worried about “going too far” and so she still usually avoided punishing him. Mrs Frost agreed to try small early punishments and to get over her guilt about these.

At the same time Mrs Frost agreed to make a special effort to involve Keith around the house and to praise him. She said she would look for lots of opportunities to give him attention at times such as these, as far as she was able to in her rather busy home. She recognised that these occasions allowed Keith to receive the extra attention he needed. Ignoring his more minor, irritating behaviours, to cut down on the attention he gained for these, was the final part of the strategy.

Follow-up interview

Seven weeks later Mrs Frost seemed much more relaxed and calm and said that there had been a marked improvement in Keith’s behaviour and attitudes at home. Mrs Frost said that she was now emphasising his very positive behaviours by praising him. As a result he had far fewer tantrums and now also appeared to be enjoying much better relationships with his brother and sister.

Mrs Frost had, unfortunately, found it very difficult to ignore his nail biting. He had in fact bitten his nail right down to the skin. She agreed that both she and her husband found this particularly irritating but she would make a further effort to tackle this and be more consistent in ignoring it over a long period.

Over the following months Keith’s behaviour gradually settled in the nursery also.

Conclusions

Exploring difficulties such as these can be very distressing for staff and parents alike. The most caring and dedicated adults are, paradoxically, the most vulnerable to these routines and the most upset by the personal, annoying nature of the child’s behaviours. Our experience, is, however, that their commitment, in the end, does win through.

References

Mellor, N. (1997) *Attention Seeking : a practical solution for the classroom*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing.

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

KEY POINTS

- Attention seeking has been little researched
- There is no checklist of “symptoms”: the best guide is simply the adult’s feeling of intense irritation
- Dealing with attention seeking ideally needs a joint approach between nursery and home. Remember that parents may be upset and confused, so be sensitive.
- There is no magic pill solution, but strategies such as ignoring, praising and punishing must be applied consistently