

If your cherub drives everyone mad by insisting on always being the centre of attention, Heather Welford has some sensible advice

LOOK AT ME

When Beatrice (now five) was a toddler, her baby babble noises became screams and shrieks to attract attention. Then, as she learned to talk, she would continually repeat a word or phrase until it got some response — and she'd do this when she could see people were busy, such as when we were on the phone,' says Lesley Reader, from Banchory, Aberdeenshire.

'For instance, she would ask for a drink of milk and, if told she could have one when the phone call was over, she'd chant, "Milk, milk, milk," in a monotonous drone tone, raising people's level of irritation the more she did it.

'Sometimes she'd say she was hungry again as soon as we'd cleared up after a meal,' adds Lesley. 'Then she'd reject whatever we offered, saying it wasn't what she wanted. Requests for food rarely occurred during mealtimes themselves; it was usually when I had a moment to myself or was involved with another family member.'

Beatrice learned to manipulate to get attention, too. Says Lesley, 'When she was three, I witnessed an extraordinary conversation between her and her big sister, then aged 12. She wanted Sissy to do something for her, but her sister refused. Beatrice calmly said, "Sissy, if you don't, I shall tell Mummy you hit me." Her sister still refused and Beatrice began to shriek, "Mummy, Mummy!" I stepped in at that point and told her I'd seen and heard everything and she just carried on, quite unabashed!'

As time went on, Beatrice added physical behaviours to the droning repetition tactic, like nudging or elbowing, when she wanted Lesley's full attention. She'd be especially likely to do it when Lesley was shopping and talking to an assistant or searching for a price. 'These days, she stands right in front of us and jumps up and down, so she can't be ignored, or if anyone is watching TV she'll take the remote control away and change channels to make us notice her.'

Lesley tried a strategy of 10 minutes of 'quality' time every day, but says, 'It was never enough. I was desperate for my own space and found it very hard to be dispassionate about the situation.'

A big step forward was the decision to be more consistent about snacks and requests for food. 'We've instigated a routine of eating at mealtimes, and no snacks unless she's made a good effort to eat at the meal. She's accepted this with almost no protest, surprisingly'

Beatrice has become less demanding now that she has a full day at school. But Lesley looks back and remembers how difficult life was. 'It stopped me enjoying her company. It was like living with a tyrant, albeit a smiling, cute and affectionate one. I thought back to my

other children and whether I had done things differently with them, but I couldn't identify anything major. I wondered if being the youngest of much older siblings meant she felt she had to compete in some way. But now that we see light at the end of the tunnel, I think it's down to nature. She's bright, active, confident and imaginative, and I think she'll be an adult who challenges the world around her.'

The wind up

Some children just drive you crazy by demanding your attention. They could write 'winding Mum and Dad up' on their CV under hobbies and interests. And some parents feel like horrible failures because they've got one of these children; but whatever they do seems to make no difference. Maybe one or two children in every nursery or infant class is like this — and there's perhaps one or two in every school who need professional help.

Going round the bend

You shouldn't blame yourself if your child is this way. It may be nothing to do with you but your child's own personality that lies at the root of the behaviour. It could also be that your child has faced certain 'triggers' in his life — a spell in hospital, a new sibling, a change of schools — that have started a period of lack of confidence and a greater need for attention. His way of getting attention is to irritate you — and irritating behaviour certainly does get attention. The attention then rewards the behaviour, which increases in intensity.

Educational psychologist Dr Nigel Mellor is an expert on attention-seeking behaviour and has written two books on the subject: the most recent is *The Good, the Bad and the Irritating* (Lucky Duck, £9). He says, quite clearly, that no one is to blame. 'Very often, children like this are interesting, extrovert and sociable, and they love interacting with adults. They're not ill, they don't have anything "wrong" with them; they've just learned that behaving in a way that drives parents up the wall gets results,' he explains.

Parents of attention-seeking children are almost always caring, loving and involved, adds Dr Mellor. They feel guilty about feeling angry and exasperated with their child, and his role as a professional is to support them while they change their behaviour so that they eventually change their child's.

What Nigel Mellor does is help parents 'get back in the driving seat', as he puts it. He supports them while they learn to ignore the attention seeking and to give praise whenever they can. He calls it 'catching your child being good'. He's encouraging and sympathetic and says that if the behaviour initially becomes worse with the new approach, it's a good sign: it means your child has noticed something's happening.

'The first step to change is accepting that our reaction to the attention seeking is part of the pattern and that changing the pattern works,' he explains. ■

Is your child an attention seeker?

Here are some typical behaviours

- constant whining and whingeing
- demands for food, sweets or treats at inconvenient or impossible times
- persistent fidgeting, twitching, nail biting, nose picking, spitting
- constant lack of co-operation; always doing the opposite of what you want
- dawdling when you're in a hurry
- speaking loudly or shouting when it's not necessary
- fighting with siblings
- crying over very small things
- destroying toys or possessions
- stealing
- 'showing off'
- refusing to accept 'no'
- getting up out of bed after settling and complaining of monsters, pains, not being able to get to sleep.

Of course, many children do some or even all these things at times. But if they are happening every day, and you are getting crosser and crosser and feel less able to control them, then think about whether your own reaction to them is making the situation worse.

What to do

- Decide which behaviours (such as fidgeting or whining) you can safely ignore and ignore them every time. Deal with the dangerous, naughty or foolhardy ones (like aggression or destruction) by calmly removing your child from the scene or giving time out or an appropriate punishment (no pocket money for stealing, for instance).
- If your child has an attack: such as a tantrum or screaming fit, ignore it (unless he is in danger of harming himself). Don't show in your eyes or your body language that you have even noticed it. Keep up the ignoring — every time!
- Give lots of praise and positive comments at every chance. You might need to engineer opportunities, such as giving him little lobs, or ways to help you, so you can praise your child. Nigel Mellor quotes from a therapist colleague: 'If there are any examples of children who have developed behaviour problems as a result of receiving too much praise, we've not heard of them.'
- Seek professional support if you need it. Your child's nursery or school can refer you to an educational psychologist or family support service.

'KEIRAN, now five, has always been difficult, says his mum, Julie. The only thing that has helped has been ignoring the bad behaviour and consistently reinforcing the good. When appropriate, he has "time out" if he is acting up - like when he started singing a rude song and wouldn't be quiet. We use a star chart to reward him and he saves up stars for an agreed treat. We're convinced that without the long-term application of this approach he would be way out of control by now; instead he is improving all the time.

ANNIE is six, says her mum, Helen, 'and she's gone through stages of being 100 per cent un-cooperative. It's helped to have a guaranteed half an hour a day with her on her own, when her baby sister is asleep. She responds to discussion and responsibility and choice. We solved her refusal to get dressed in the morning by giving her a clear choice of three outfits to wear. She likes to feel she's made her own decisions.

Could it be ADHD?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder(ADHD) is not the same as attention seeking. ADHD is a learning disability and will persist, despite attempts to change behaviour. Attention seeking children are normal and healthy and don't need medication or psychiatric help