

What about me, me, me?

How to deal with your little attention seeker

by RANDI CHAPNIK MYERS

When my daughter Rachel was a toddler, I'd look forward to Sesame Street so I could slip quietly from the room. After a full morning of playing Barbies and fingerpainting, it was time to shower, call a friend or squeeze in some work. But not 10 seconds later, the inevitable MOMMY! wail would find me. My daughter needed me now — to fix the blanket, plump the pillow, change the channel. In short, she was wrangling for the big A-word: Attention.

At the same time, her older brother, already dubbed "the quiet one," was getting quieter. That's because I was spending so much time tending to Rachel's every need; it was easier to let him hang out with his Lego instead of with me.

Of course, kids need and deserve our attention, especially when they're excited, troubled, hurt or upset. But with some kids, it's never enough. Over-the-top attention seeking can drain your energies and affect the whole family; it can make your child overreliant and in older kids, it can even be manipulative.

So how should you handle your little attention seeker? Read on for the experts' tips.

IS IT TOO MUCH?

The fact is your child will lap up whatever amount of attention you're willing to give. And it's no wonder. As a newborn, he was your world. Then life changed. He became more independent, you started taking breaks from him — for yourself, your spouse, your work, your other kids. And he may want that focus back because, frankly, attention feels good.

But if you find that your child's behaviour is escalating to the point where it's affecting family dynamics, it's time to address it, says Nigel Mellor, a UK educational psychologist and author of the book *The Good, the Bad, and the Irritating: A Practical Approach for Children Who Are Attention Seeking*.

What's causing this endless me, me, me behaviour? There can be many triggers: you being swamped at work, or the new baby sucking up your energy, or a change of schools.

Whatever the reason, if your child feels he's not getting enough airtime, you can bet he won't politely ask Mom or Dad for more. Instead, he'll let you know by his actions.

GOOD AND BAD BEHAVIOUR

To curb attention seeking, your first step is to identify it. It's hard to do, though, because often attention seeking seems just like plain old bad behaviour. "Children realize early that the surest way to capture your attention is to misbehave," Mellor says. That's because, ironically, we tend to give our kids more attention for bad behaviour than we do for good.

When junior is quietly reading a book, you're likely to keep silent or take that time to mop the kitchen floor. But if he rips out the pages, you'll be back — and all over him — in a flash.

Cynthia Smith, a teacher with the Toronto District School Board, sees attention-seeking misbehaviour at work, and then again at home with her daughters, Katie,* seven, and Laura," three. "When kids don't get attention for acting nicely, they act up," Smith says. "They'll definitely take attention for bad behaviour over no attention at all."

She's noticed, though, that her kids vie for attention in very different ways. Laura acts downright naughty, knowing Smith will drop what she's doing and focus on her. She'll block the TV show her sister is watching, for instance, or spill juice on the table, just to get a rise out of Mom. But when her other daughter, Katie, was three, it was a different story: "Every afternoon, while I was making supper, she'd sob to be held," says Smith. So day after day, Smith would leave the stove to soothe her daughter. But when a little cuddle just wouldn't do, she was baffled. She was convinced there was nothing seriously wrong and, yet, Katie just wouldn't stop. Then one day, after 45 long minutes of stroking and tear wiping didn't make a dent, her confusion cleared. "Suddenly, I realized that all this carrying on was just for attention. It was no different from a temper tantrum. And I was encouraging it!"

If you do encourage it, attention-seeking misbehaviour may continue as your child ages. Whether it's door slamming, dragging muddy shoes across the hall or blaring his iPod, once he appreciates his power to make you sit up and take notice, chances are, he'll keep it up.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

It's a frustrating fact that if you respond to misbehaviour by screaming, nagging or giving in, you're just perpetuating it. "Arguing, reasoning, pleading, threatening, that's all attention," Mellor says. So, really, you're giving your child what she's often subconsciously seeking.

To break the cycle, be careful what behaviour you reward with your attention. It's actually quite simple: If you want her to continue what she's doing, make a big fuss over it. Otherwise, don't.

Saying "good job" is not enough, Mellor says. You have to give her the attention she craves, and deserves. So next time you see her sharing candy with her little brother, or colouring nicely on her own, drop the laundry basket, home in on her and really ham it up. "Make sure you use lots of words," Mellor says.

By contrast, you should respond to your child's misbehaviour by giving it very little attention. Either ignore it (which works well when she's whining from the back seat, "Are we there yet?") or calmly mete out a clear, one-warning consequence. Either way, be consistent. "If you explode over the nose picking after ignoring it for a week, all that work is wasted," Mellor says. Same goes for consequences — you have to follow through. It worked for Smith: "I told Katie that if she couldn't stop crying, she'd have to continue in her room. The first day she cried for 45 minutes. The next, for 15, and by day three, the crying was a distant memory."

ATTENTION YOU CAN COUNT ON

Kids are less likely to throw a tantrum to get attention if they already feel noticed (see "Giving the Best Attention," below). "If each of your children can count on your complete, undivided attention at least once every day, they'll have less reason to fight for it at other times," says Smith. Her daughters both know the routine: They each get exclusive time before bed to do what they want with Mom — read books, sing songs, share a private talk. It's special time, not just for them, but for Smith too. "They each have a chance to open up and to feel satisfied that I hear them," Smith says. "And it's in those moments that our relationships really blossom."

**Names changed by request.*

Giving the best attention

1. Give praise and attention for behaving well and doing chores.
2. Don't allow interruptions — the other kids should be busy, the computer should be off, voice mail should answer the phone.
3. Let your child choose the activity. It can be anything: reading books, playing catch or just lying together and talking.
4. Make sure you get down to his level, both physically (eye level) and figuratively (developmental level).
5. Take the time to ask questions and to listen when your child opens up.
6. Don't just go through the motions. Really immerse yourself in your child's world.
7. Set a daily time where each child knows she gets your full attention. (For older kids, you could also schedule an exclusive outing once a month.)

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