



# “ ATTENTION SEEKING ”

## February 2010

*A newsletter for all professionals fascinated by the puzzles and challenges of attention seeking. Resources, ideas, news and case study material.*

*Remember as social beings we all need some attention from others. What we are concerned with here is EXCESSIVE, INAPPROPRIATE attention seeking.*

### NEWS

The **British Journal of Special Education** has published the article “*Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or attention seeking? Ways of distinguishing two common childhood problems*” (2009 vol. 36 no.1 p.26-35). This should help with early stages of analysing and tackling challenging behaviours in class. This is even more important in view of the new NICE guidelines on ADHD. They recommend using medication only for the most severe cases and not at all for pre-schoolers. (visit [www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/CG72](http://www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/CG72) section 8 deals with school).

The DVD training pack “*Helping parents deal with attention seeking behaviour*” has been distributed to many colleagues.

A three page interview about attention seeking by Michael Jones (a regular writer about special needs) “*Look at me!*” is in **Special Children** August/September 2009 p.18-21.

[Send in your news about attention seeking](#)

### TOPICAL TOPIC

A teacher from a private school remarked in a recent workshop that although the school didn’t have much in the way of general misbehaviour, there was a great deal of attention seeking.

Effective praise has many pitfalls. One secondary school teacher in a recent workshop noted that although he constantly praised his top group, he tended to criticize his second top group (as they were not up to the same standard).

Also, note that good behaviour doesn’t grab your attention in quite the same way that irritating behaviour does. For instance, you tend not to notice when your son puts his bike away - because you aren’t tripping over it!

### QUOTE OF THE YEAR

“ Hillary Clinton... enraged [North Korea’s] leaders last month by likening them to unruly children seeking attention. ”

The Guardian, August 4<sup>th</sup> 2009

### THE LITTLE KNOWN HISTORY OF ALFRED ADLER

As we noted in the previous Newsletters, Adler broke away from Freud to develop his own theory of human behaviour. From our perspective one way to view Adler’s ideas is that we are social creatures, responding to social needs. Many of the ideas Adler developed have entered mainstream thought, such as the “inferiority complex” and “life-style”. He founded the child guidance clinic movement (in Vienna in 1919/1920) and presented lectures to parent associations. He encouraged schools to involve pupils in “class councils”.

Adler was extremely popular in the USA and his book “**Understanding Human Nature**” sold in the hundreds of thousands (see Hoffman’s biography “*The Drive for Self*”). One important concept which has developed from his work is “attention seeking” (or “attention needing”) - which can be seen as arising directly, and quite simply, from the fact that we are social creatures.

### WEB SITE



[www.nmellor.com](http://www.nmellor.com)

This web site is updated on a regular, but infrequent, basis. The web site also lists publications available. Please contact me if you find any of them impossible to obtain.

Past copies of this newsletter are on the website under the heading “Attention Seeking”.

The web site also links to a supplementary website with oodles more material on attention seeking e.g. explaining much more about understanding the **functions** of behaviour and also about problems with observation in class.

Visit: [sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs/](http://sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs/)

## RESEARCH IDEAS

Interest in attention seeking is growing and colleagues continue to ask about research topics. There are many. Here is one. I'll list more next time:

Children become involved in the care system and the criminal justice system for a whole host of reasons. My own experience, and from a close look at case study reports and the general literature, indicates that a proportion of these children display quite severe attention seeking behaviour (see Sam Harton p.71 and Billy Harvey p.91 in "Attention Seeking" 2008 published by Sage). It would be extremely helpful to know how many. Of course, their attention seeking may have arisen for a whole host of reasons, and complex interventions may be required. But in some cases it may be that, once recognised, the attention seeking could be tackled directly and quite satisfactorily.

Unfortunately, this research project may raise difficult questions about the absence of attention seeking from standard questionnaires (see the article "Attention seeking: The paradoxes of an under-researched concept" in *Educational and Child Psychology* 2005, vol. 22 no. 4 p. 94-107).

**Over to you for more research!**

**LET ME KNOW YOUR PROGRESS AND CONTACT ME FOR MORE INFORMATION.**

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## ATTENTION SEEKING ADULTS

Although we focus on children it is fascinating to see attention seeking in adults. In the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual** that psychiatrists rely on, we can find "**Histrionic Personality Disorder**": "A pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking".

Such people "*seek or demand reassurance, approval or praise from others and are uncomfortable in situations in which they are not the centre of attention*". The manual goes on to explain that "*people with this disorder are lively and dramatic and are always drawing attention to themselves*". They are "*very self-centered with little or no tolerance for the frustration of deferred gratification*". They may "*act out a role such as that of 'victim' or 'princess' ... [and] ... constantly demand reassurance...Frequent complaints of poor health may be present, such as weakness or headaches*".

Sounds familiar? Sounds like adult attention seeking! I wonder how much of this starts with childhood attention seeking?

It is fascinating to see how many famous people describe what sounds as an overwhelming desire for attention, dating back to childhood. Of course this can lead to success, for instance in the field of entertainment - or it can put them on a treadmill of needs they can never fulfil.

**Gerri Halliwell:** "On the run from the one thing she can't escape - her own, fame driven, attention-craving, roller-coaster personality" (Daily Mail 13.11.99 p.26).

**Debbie Harry:** "An adopted child ... dreaming her real mother was Marilyn Monroe, she was hungry for attention from the outset" (The Guardian Weekend 23.1.99 p.10).

**Jane Horrocks** of Ab.Fab. and "Little Voice" fame: "She thought she wasn't attractive ... spent her life seeking attention" (Observer Life 10.1.99 p.9).

See also **Mark Twain** in "Attention Seeking": he "openly sulked when he could not keep the stage... he demanded constant attention" (2008 p.90).

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## BUT BACK TO CHILDREN...

We saw last Newsletter (see the website) how Tommy's attention seeking seems to have begun at the birth of his sister - a classic trigger. Mum gradually became depressed with her problems of managing him. Parents quarrelled over their strategies - another common situation. They began a lengthy programme of support from "Dr H." and his team (our training pack is much more time and personnel efficient)

## CASE STUDY: TOMMY, AGE 4: THE CONCLUSION

Here is the ending of the story we started last time (the text is partly quoted from the article with my notes added in red italics for emphasis):

Mrs M., Tommy's mum, learned to give "simple, firm commands" instead of pleading with Tommy [*being firm is a key - but parents hate it*]. Time-out was also used, as mum notes: "By stepping in early I could pre-empt Tommy's tantrums" [*early intervention is another key - but again parents hate it!*]. In this programme ignoring was apparently not used - in our approach *selective, planned ignoring* is always a vital part.

Parents used rewards: a chart of "happy faces" and praise and hugs also trips out and Smarties. Unfortunately because of his high rate of Tommy's misbehaviour, "the opportunities to gain rewards were few and far between" [*this is a common problem - we stress to parents, and teachers, the need to build in success by creating opportunities for praise*]. Parents were encouraged to have "a more systematically planned reward system".

Tommy however, quickly learned delaying tactics over time-out (arguing and running away) which gained him even more attention. He began screaming and parents disagreed in front of him. Dad used physical punishment. Tommy was able to manipulate his parents e.g. “with babylike request for help”. Parents were unsure whether these were genuine or not *[ it is common, particularly with bright children, that they learn faster than their parents, and switch tactics ]*. Parents continued to feel “sorry” for Tommy and guilty after using sanctions *[ addressing the emotional side of parent interventions is a key to success - this is built into our parent programme ]*.

Over 8 weeks many of his unacceptable behaviours declined, some, however, increased *[ parents have to be prepared for uneven progress - most commonly things simply get worse overall before they get better! ]*. One fatal flaw in the parents’ approach was talking to Tommy about opportunities to earn smiley faces, rather than simply getting on with it *[ making sure parents simply “pile in the praise” is a vital element in our approach ]*. Parents objected to the use of Smarties as rewards *[ which we would tend to agree with - we stress a wide range of natural social rewards ]*.

After 12 weeks all the family, parents and Tommy all seemed much happier and the progress was maintained at one year follow-up *[ in the book “The Good the Bad and the Irritating” we found progress maintained over several years in all of the case studies ]*.

We will leave the last words to Mrs M., Tommy’s mum, underlying the importance of family intervention “The professionals can spend only a few hours each week with the child and so ‘mum’ must become ‘the therapist in the field’ ... without my ‘training’ it would be impossible to cope without frequent recourse to Dr. H.” *[ our programme in the DVD pack is designed for the common situation of one busy practitioner, working alone with the parents as the main key to change, and spending, at most, two or three relatively short sessions ]*.

## CONTACT DETAILS, etc.

Electronic Communication: [mail@nmellor.com](mailto:mail@nmellor.com)

Website: [www.nmellor.com](http://www.nmellor.com)

Supplementary website:  
[sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs/](https://sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs/)

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Nigel Mellor, 2010.