

Attention traps in managing children's behaviour

Imagine the following scenario. You're trying to finish up work for the day. Your children are in the next room and they've been playing quietly together for half an hour. You can hardly believe it! Chances are, you'd use this rare moment of peace and quiet to get on with your work. The next minute, you hear them arguing loudly over their toys. You instantly feel frustrated. What do you do now? You wouldn't be alone if you said you'd stop what you were doing, go into the next room and tell them off for being so loud while you're trying to work.

This scenario demonstrates a common trap that parents can fall into where we accidentally ignore good behaviour (your children playing quietly) and instead give attention to misbehaviour (them arguing over their toys). It's important to remember that any attention from parents - positive or negative - tends to be reinforcing for kids as it produces feelings of attachment. This is especially true when the attention is accompanied by high levels of emotion, as is often the case when we're responding to misbehaviour. So, when we get frustrated at children when they are being noisy, and then leave them alone when they are quiet and settled, we are accidentally reinforcing the exact behaviour we wish to discourage. We end up in a trap where, for good behaviour, there is very little engagement or attention, but for misbehaviour there is a lot.

Luckily, you can shift this balance through making some simple changes in the way you respond to your children's behaviour, both desirable and undesirable behaviour. We want to take the emotional attention that your child gets for misbehaviour and instead give this at times when they engage in desirable behaviour. We want to respond to good behaviour in what psychologists call "attachment-rich" ways - with time/attention, positive emotion (e.g., pride, happiness), praise ("It makes me so proud to see you doing..."), and affection. On the flip side, we want to respond to undesirable behaviour in a calm and boring (or "attachment-neutral") way. Of course, you can and should still put in appropriate limits, but try to remain calm and measured as you do so. For minor attention-seeking behaviour, sometimes the most effective response can be to ignore these completely.

Because attention is one of the biggest drivers of children's behaviour, shifting the way you give your attention can significantly increase your child's desirable behaviours and decrease their misbehaviour.

This week, write down three things you would like to see your child doing more of. Start small, and try to make these as specific as possible (e.g., following an instruction the first time I ask; playing quietly with brother for 5 minutes; packing away toys without being asked). Then make sure to deliberately watch out for and catch it every time your child does one of these things - you may be surprised to see how often your child is already doing the right thing once you really look out for it. Each time you catch your child doing one of the things you've listed, respond in those attachment-rich ways - with attention, positive emotion, praise and affection. You might choose to sometimes give a reward also, but don't forget that your attention and positive emotion are far more reinforcing for children (despite what they might say!). At the same time, try to reduce the attention (especially the emotional attention) that you give to your child's undesirable behaviour.

Hopefully, if you can prioritise doing this, you'll soon start to see more of the behaviours you want and less of the ones you don't.

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