

Thriving During the Elementary Years - Parental Attention and Child Behavior

By Jan Hittelman

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As people we tend to focus on the negative more than the positive. A reality that profoundly impacts all facets of our existence, including the way we parent.

All children have basic needs. There are, for example, basic physical needs. All children require food, air, water and shelter. In addition, children have basic emotional needs. These include the need for nurturance and attention. Children will do whatever is necessary to fulfill these needs.

Now here's the crazy part - because we are naturally negative, we unwittingly train our children to get our attention through negative behaviors. The very behaviors we disdain in our children are often fueled by our own negative attention. We teach our children, for example, to bother us when we're on the phone! Yes, we teach them to do that. We rarely, if ever, give our children positive feedback when they don't interrupt us, and always give them negative feedback when they do.

The good news is that even small shifts in your parental attention will result in significant and often dramatic changes in your child's behavior. If you're like most parents, there are specific undesirable behaviors that you are frequently trying to correct in your child. You have seemingly endless "discussions" regarding these behaviors, try a variety of punishments, but to no avail. Chances are that after the undesirable behavior occurs, you're giving your child negative feedback regarding it. At the same time, however, you're also giving your child your time and attention as a consequence of the undesirable behavior. As a result, you're actually reinforcing their undesirable behavior with your negative attention. Remember, children need parental attention and will do whatever they have learned to do in order to get it. That is why a key element to parenting success is teaching our children how to get our attention in more positive ways. The expression, "catch your child being good" sums it up.

When your child misbehaves, provide succinct minimal verbal feedback and whatever negative consequences result and that's it. The time to lecture your child is later, at a calmer more neutral moment. You will be able to discuss it more rationally, with less anger and you will not be feeding into this negative attention-seeking behavior.

The goal is to teach your child to get your attention positively. Consider some of the behaviors that you would like to see your child improve. Pick one behavior that you believe your child could easily improve with a little effort. Define in your own mind the opposite or desirable behavior that you want to see more frequently. Write it down, being as specific about the behavior as possible. Make a deliberate effort to shift your parental attention (minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive). Try to catch your child being good; anytime you see the desirable behavior, provide positive feedback.

The excerpts above are from Dr. Hittelman's book: "Parenting Essentials: Seven Steps to Parenting Success, available at no charge on the Internet at BoulderPsychologicalServices.com.

Upcoming PEN Event:

March 6th^h How to Talk to Our Kids About Health Topics 9am – 11am Recycling Center
(1901 63rd Street, Boulder)

Presenters: Katy Fleming, BVSD Health Ed. Coordinator & Chet Chavez, Intervention Specialist

Learn more about PEN by visiting their website at: www.parentengagementnetwork.com or by contacting Betsy Fox with the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3981.

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