

Look at me!

How should you handle attention-seeking behaviour?
Sue Cowley offers her advice...

There are times when it is best to notice and deal with children's misbehaviour, and times when it is better to ignore it or distract from it. Although our natural reaction to misbehaviour is to give it our attention, in fact attention-seeking behaviour is usually best ignored. If a child misbehaves to gain attention, in the long run, giving attention to that misbehaviour will only reinforce the problem.

The scenario

You are tearing your hair out, trying to decide how best to deal with Danielle. From the moment she arrives in the morning, she demands full-on attention from everyone around her. She screams or cries until an adult goes to comfort and support her. If you dare pay attention to another child, Danielle goes into destructive mode. She has already destroyed a doll's house, broken a door off one of the ride-on cars, and ripped a display of children's pictures off the wall. At lunchtime, Danielle creates what staff jokingly refer to as 'modern art'. She takes great delight in squashing her food up in her hands and painting it on any surface she can reach. You've spoken to Danielle's parents, and apparently she does this at home as well.

The issue

When children exhibit extreme attention-seeking behaviour, this is often the result of negative habits learned in the home. Sometimes parents or carers forget to pay attention to their children when they are behaving well, and instead only give them attention when they are misbehaving. After a while children become trained to misbehave in order to gain attention. This can quickly become a vicious cycle, because parents reinforce the poor behaviour by reacting to it again and again.

Dealing with the behaviour

Attention-seeking behaviour is tricky to deal with, because you need to fight your instinctive reaction, and help your staff learn how to do this as well. When a child is misbehaving, most of us feel an almost overwhelming temptation to give that child our attention. Fighting this instinct, and giving your attention to someone who is behaving well, is the first step in breaking this vicious cycle.

- 1 Talk together with staff to agree on a set of strategies to use with Danielle.
- 2 Remind everyone to *catch Danielle behaving well*. When she does behave properly, they should use specific, detailed praise to talk to her about how and why her behaviour is appropriate.
- 3 Discuss which of Danielle's behaviours require an immediate intervention, because of a potential danger to herself or others.
- 4 Talk about which kinds of misbehaviour staff feel it is appropriate to ignore. For instance, do they feel they could stop drawing attention to her food-painting attempts at lunchtimes? A good rule of thumb is that if the behaviour is not hurting the child or others, and is not immediately destructive to resources or furniture, it can usually be ignored.
- 5 While staff are ignoring Danielle, remind them to highlight the positive behaviour of others around her. This will help Danielle understand that she can only gain their attention through behaving well.
- 6 When Danielle does behave in a dangerous or destructive way, ask staff to minimise verbal interactions, and instead simply guide Danielle to a safe place in order to calm down.

Finding solutions

Start to build up Danielle's confidence and self-esteem, by using lots of praise and encouragement.

- Set up activities that will help Danielle focus on learning, and feel a sense of positive achievement.
- Nominate a staff member to take Danielle to an activity as soon as she arrives. Aim to give her positive attention right from the word go, rather than waiting until she starts demanding attention by being difficult.
- Consider whether Danielle would react well to being given some responsibility in your setting - for instance, preparing the snacks for the other children.
- Talk with Danielle's parents about some strategies for home - they may feel trapped in a negative cycle of poor behaviour with their daughter.



about the author
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- Explain to them about how attention can reinforce behaviour, either positive or negative. Help them see that it is sometimes okay to ignore misbehaviour, especially where that behaviour is being done specifically to get a reaction.
- Offer Danielle's parents some tips about how to deal with their daughter outside the home - attention seekers will typically choose the most embarrassing moment to kick off (for instance, right in the middle of a crowded supermarket).

