

The Parent's Corner

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ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

May 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

How many times have you heard the phrase, "Oh, ignore them -- they just want attention"? How many times have you said it yourself? Or a similar phrase? Now, what if I changed this phrase instead to "Sometimes kids ask for love in the most unloving of ways."? Attention-seeking behavior can come across as needy, exhausting, infuriating, or upsetting to parents. A child may purposely act out or display the need to be by a parent's side constantly. In turn, attention-seeking gets a negative connotation associated with it. Parents learn to ignore it, which often exacerbates the behavior. Because, at the end of the day, behavior is communication. What is your child telling you? What are they needing from you, or the world, that they feel they are not receiving?

Children act out for a variety of reasons: age, developmental level, stress, boredom, loneliness, irritability, disorders like ADHD, trauma, low self-esteem, or as a means to connect with an adult or peer. Behaviors may include lying, stealing, behavioral consequences in school, dropping grades, power struggles over home rules, yelling, screaming, crying, hitting, cursing, a regression in bathroom or sleep behaviors, etc. Decoding what your child's behaviors are, and *what they are communicating* is key in helping them choose more positive ways to communicate their needs.

Below are some general tips to move forward in understanding these messages your child is sending:

- **Make note of their background and when changes began.** Does your child have a trauma history? A loss or change in the family or a change in the child's sense of safety or primary support system? Note that this can be even something you may not think of or deem a "big" loss like a death -- a family move, a parent's new job, the loss of a pet, or a new sibling can provide a sense of change or loss that disrupts the child's sense of structure. Notice when these behaviors began occurring to get a better sense of a trigger for the behavior.
- **Get a medical evaluation.** If you haven't noticed any recognizable differences in parenting or structure at home or school, consider a medical and/or psychological evaluation. Children with learning disabilities, ADHD or anxiety disorders could be expressing their frustration by acting out -- the only way they know how.
- **Give them a voice and actually listen.** When your child is acting out to communicate needs, it is often because they know they must do something extreme in order to get undivided attention, even if it is negative. Sit down with them and start the conversation - ask them if they can verbalize what they are feeling, what they need from you, and what helps/doesn't help them. Every child is different, and a response you feel is helpful to them may not be. Make sure this is a time away from technology, not scrolling through a phone or with a TV on in the background. Your child should have your undivided attention.
- **Explain what an actual emergency is.** Talk with your child about the difference between an actual emergency (that would need your immediate attention) and something your child wants but isn't urgent. This may take practice because your child's mind and body may tell them their problem is an emergency when it is not. If it helps, write out the difference and post it somewhere to reference - a family bulletin board or the fridge. Have your child come up with a catchphrase or signal to let you know when something *is* an emergency.
- **Give them attention.** It seems wrong, right? Give attention to the child who is acting out? It may feel as if you are rewarding negative behavior. Instead of thinking of this as going to get ice cream right after a child has a tantrum, view it as time set aside every day and week that your child receives with you, *despite* their behavior that week. It doesn't have to cost money, or be anything extravagant. It could be 20 minutes of an activity in your child's room or a walk outside. This should be 1:1 as much as possible with your child, even if it's easier to include the other children.
- **Be consistent.** If you follow all other tips but aren't consistent, all your hard work with your child falls by the wayside. BE CONSISTENT! Make sure your consequences are consistent, their expectations are consistent, and your responses to them are as consistent as possible. Inconsistency will confuse your child and create bigger behavioral issues in the long run. If you feel you are slipping and won't be able to follow through, take some time to compose yourself first in order to keep the structure.

As always, we are in your corner this summer if you need extra support!