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## Providing positive attention to children

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*Bedtime with four-year-old Zoe was a nightmare. She just would not settle by herself and would insist on story after story from her parents. First, she wanted her Dad to read and then her Mum. When they left her, she would cry until they came back or she would come down the stairs saying she was thirsty or the room was too cold or too hot. Her parents would go up to sort this out and then she would want something else. It was endless. Her parents would resort to lecturing, cajoling and bribing her to stay in her room, with just 'one more story' or 'another five minutes downstairs'. Both her parents and Zoe herself would become exhausted and sometimes very upset.*

Have you noticed how young children will do anything to get their parents' attention? Having their parents notice and respond to them is probably the greatest reward for children and they will seek this in as many ways as

possible. Often parents find ways of giving approving, loving attention to their children, with warm hugs, close conversations and kind words. These are good habits and are very healthy for parent and child. Unfortunately, parents often unwittingly provide attention negatively via shouting, criticising and even slapping. Strange as it may seem, these negative interactions are preferable to no attention at all and children will seek them out in place of being ignored.

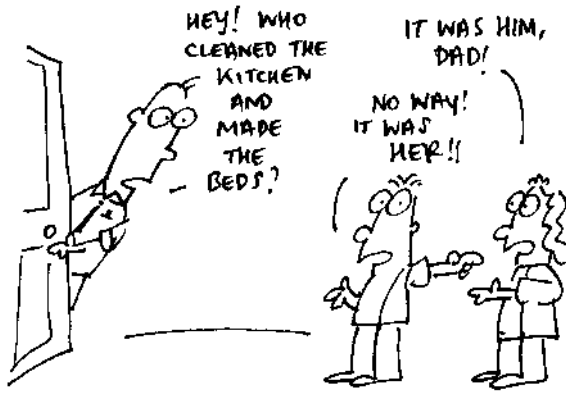
In the example above, Zoe is getting loads of attention from her parents for *not going to bed*. If she makes a fuss she gets extra stories, extra time up and can even persuade her parents to sit in the bed with her. You'd wonder why she would want to change this at all! In this situation her parents can make some simple changes in how they respond to Zoe at night time that could make a real difference. For example, they could

- 1** Set up a routine at night (which they keep!) that specifies at what time she goes to bed, how many stories she gets, and at what time they leave her in her room.
- 2** Ensure she gets lots of positive attention during the stories and lots of praise when she goes to bed on time, or gets into the bed as asked.
- 3** Ensure she gets little attention when she gets out of bed or asks for something. The parents could firmly guide her back to her bed, without saying much at all.
- 4** Ensure she gets no extra rewards such as an extra story or extra time up, when she gets out of the bed, but is simply brought back to her room.
- 5** Also use a star chart to encourage her to stay in her bed (see Step 4 for information on star charts).

## Catch your child being good

We know from research that when attention is given to a certain behaviour, that behaviour tends to be repeated and to develop, while behaviour that is not given attention disappears. It is human nature to get trapped into giving children more attention when they are misbehaving than when they are behaving well. For example, when two children are playing quietly together they are usually ignored until one of them starts an argument or begins whining. Parents respond rapidly to the child's negative behaviour, often with criticism or scolding, thus providing attention for negative behaviour while ignoring the positive behaviour shown when the children were playing quietly. If this pattern is repeated often enough, it does not take long for children to learn from experience that fighting and whining get a lot of adult attention. Sometimes this can become a vicious cycle. A child who misbehaves gains attention from a parent in the form of shouting or criticising. This can leave both parent and child upset and angry. From this position the child is more likely to seek attention again with misbehaviour





and the parent more likely to respond angrily, and so the cycle repeats itself.

So how can you break this cycle? Or, even better, how can you turn it on its head so that it becomes a positive cycle? The best way to do this is to go out of your way to make sure your children get lots of positive attention and encouragement whenever they behave well – literally catch your child being good. This positive attention leaves both you and your child feeling more content and close to one another. From this position the child is more likely to seek attention positively by behaving well again and the parent is more likely to respond positively. Thus this new positive cycle is established.

It can be difficult to make this switch to positive attention, especially when you are not used to it, or if you have experienced a lot of difficult behaviour in the past. However, it can make a real difference if you give it a try, and let go of any resentment from past misbehaviour. Consider the example of Robin:

*Robin had been involved in a lot of conflict with her ten-year-old son, usually on a daily basis. This*

*usually started with him refusing to get out of bed in the morning, while she repeatedly called him with increasing irritation, ending in a screaming match, which set the scene for the rest of the day. Almost every interaction between them until the end of the day was hostile and negative. When Robin first started a parenting course, desperate to change things, she couldn't imagine being able to find anything good about her son's behaviour to which she could pay positive attention.*

*However, when she stood back a bit from the situation and observed her son, she quickly saw that there were many previously unnoticed aspects of his behaviour which she could acknowledge with positive attention. When he brought his cup over to the sink after breakfast she smiled and thanked him. When he let his younger brother play a computer game with him she said, 'It's very nice the way you are kind to your brother'. When he sat down to do his homework, she was able to comment positively on this. Over time she began to see more and more things that she could praise and encourage and she began to enjoy the change of approach and how it made her feel different. Her son's behaviour changed positively over a number of months and the relationship between them improved markedly.*

## How to give positive attention

Going out of our way to give positive attention can feel a little uncomfortable at first – in our culture we are not used to it. But it gets easier and feels more natural as you persist with it and find your own individual style.

There is no one right way to provide positive attention. What is most important is that it is personal and experienced as genuine by both parent and child. With young children, a simple pat on the head or a warm smile can be enough. For older children you may want to specifically comment on the behaviour you like. For example, you could say, 'I see you've started your homework, that's good', or 'I'm really pleased to see that you've come in on time'.

If you are used to a lot of difficult behaviour from your child and feel there is little you can notice that is positive, a good way to get started is to spend some time thinking about the things you like about your child. You might want to recall the times he or she behaved well in the past (however long ago!) or times you enjoyed together and felt close. When you have pictured some of these things in your mind, write down one or two of them. When you've made a list, keep it in a safe place, and over the next few days look for further things your child does that you like and begin to note these down also. As you collect more and more examples of good behaviour, your attitude toward your child will change. Then, when you're ready, you can share some of your observations with your child. By now you are giving some really good positive attention to him or her.

## Positive attention can divert misbehaviour

Psychologists have found that much of children's misbehaviour is rewarded by the attention it receives. They have also found that a bout of misbehaviour often happens just after a period of good behaviour that has gone unnoticed. By attending to the good behaviour first you can

give children the attention they are looking for and divert them from seeking the attention negatively. A good example of this comes from a time I was working with a mother and her seven-year-old son and four-year-old daughter. The mother was describing how her son was often aggressive toward his little sister and this concerned her greatly. As she was speaking I could observe the children out of the corner of my eye and I saw how the girl was beginning to annoy her brother. She was trying to take the figures he was playing with and he was beginning to get upset, taking them back from her. It struck me that he was on the point of hitting out, so, rather than let this escalate, I went over to him and said, 'It can be hard playing with your little sister, but you're doing a good job, letting her have some of your toys'. He enjoyed the compliment, relaxed and then said, 'Look Tina, you can play with these figures and I'll play with these ones'. In this way, a bout of misbehaviour was avoided, and the child was praised for sharing with his sister. Of course this tactic does not work every time, but it can be very powerful in diverting misbehaviour to notice the good (or slightly good) behaviour that precedes it.

## Can children be given too much attention?

Children can certainly be given too much negative attention for troublesome behaviour. Children who are constantly pestering their parents – arguing and whining – have learned that this way of behaving is guaranteed to get a response. Instead, providing attention to children when they are not behaving in this way, for example,



when they are quiet, pleasant and doing what is asked of them, will, over time, bring about positive changes in their behaviour.

Some parents may be reluctant to praise ordinary behaviour or give a lot of positive attention, fearing it will make their children big-headed or that they might become dependent on the praise they receive. Research shows that children who receive much praise and encouragement – especially for ordinary and simple things – turn out to be the most successful, confident and securely independent adults. When positive attention is genuine and sincere, it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to provide too much.

## Focus on what you want

Catching children being good is essentially about switching your focus to attending to what you want rather than what you don't want. Often parents are very clear about the behaviour they don't want in their children – fighting,



whingeing, staying out late, etc. – but are less clear about what they do want from them. Instead of your two older children squabbling and fighting all day, what behaviour would you like to see? Perhaps you would like to see them getting along better, or sharing, or playing quietly together. Catching children being good is about thinking in advance about what you want and going out of your way to notice this behaviour and make a big deal of it when it occurs. Remember also to catch yourself being good as a parent. As I have said earlier it is important to apply these positive principles to yourself as well as to your children.

Making a shift to consistently focus on what you want, rather than what you don't want, can make a real difference in your life, transforming your own sense of self, your relationship with your children and with your partner.



### Tips for going forward

- 1** Make a note of the specific times your children behave well or better than usual. Be on the lookout to catch them being good.
- 2** Notice things that happen in your family that you are pleased about and that you would like to see happen again.