



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping with Attention-seeking Behaviors

Lucy Daniels Center teachers and clinicians believe that the best educational and clinical experience and research suggests that children seek the amount of attention that they feel they need to grow and develop. When there is a significant difference between the parent's and child's sense of the amount of attention needed, the child is often described as seeking excessive or inappropriate attention, particularly if the child is whiny, clingy, silly, or provocative.

Children generally seek so-called inappropriate attention when they feel unable to manage their emotions or behavior. Needing extra help is usually a sign that a child is not functioning at his or her best level. We call this regression. Regressions may be caused either by physiological stresses including hunger, fatigue, or illness, or by emotional stresses including anxiety, frustration, or sadness. The following story illustrates a regression due to emotional stress.

Three year-old Mario demanded a certain toy in the toy store. He fell to the floor, sobbing "fake tears" when his mother did not yield to his demands. In a comforting manner, Mario's mother swooped him up and removed him from the scene.

Mario's mother realized that she could either view Mario as manipulating and generating tears to get his way, or alternatively, view Mario as desperately wanting the toy and responding to the distress that had overwhelmed him. Mario's distress resulted from his difficulty tolerating the disappointment of not obtaining the toy. He was also worried about both disappointing and

being angry at his beloved and needed mother. Finally, Mario was embarrassed about making a public scene. Mario's mother understood that her son had resorted to generating "crocodile tears" in an effort to convey the magnitude of his distress.

We recommend that parents emulate Mario's mother's approach of expecting appropriate behavior, while simultaneously conveying through words and actions that they do not see their child's behavior as originating from something "bad" within them, such as excessive self-centered needs for attention or to get their own way. Children will feel that their parents understand that they sometimes become overwhelmed, and would not otherwise choose to be manipulative or demanding. This positive approach and view of children will build their self-esteem and their relationship with parents, without reinforcing unhelpful behaviors. The following story also illustrates this approach.

Four year-old Tommy always dawdled at clean up time at school, but would clean up well when a teacher assisted and encouraged him.

Tommy's teacher wondered whether Tommy was confused about the cognitive aspects of clean-up time, including the sequencing of tasks. She also wondered whether Tommy was overburdened by the emotional demands of clean up time, such as tolerating the frustration of not being able to complete a task or having to comply with imposed rules. Tommy's teacher attempted to understand Tommy, rather than just to assume that Tommy's willingness to clean up when she joined him was evidence that he really was "just" seeking attention.

All children occasionally misbehave for the purpose of eliciting parental responses so they can get a clearer feel for limits. Some children, however engage in so-called "negative attention-seeking behavior," which involves an effort to provoke a response that they know will be negative. Such behavior should always perplex parents, and cause them to examine the behavior more deeply, because negative attention never feels good to a child - after all, the attention comes with quite a price. Disapproving, irritated, reproachful attention does not fill a child with good feeling any more than

such attention feels welcomed by an adult! There needs to be quite a “pay-off” to induce a child to actually seek out such negativity. The following is a common example of negative appearing attention-seeking behavior:

Three year old Sidney repeatedly came downstairs at bedtime, asking for a glass of water, despite the clear message of disapproval from his parents as the trips continued. As the days and weeks went on, Sidney’s parents’ patience grew thinner, their irritation increased, and yet Sidney continued to insist that he was thirsty.

Sidney clearly recognized and cared about his parent’s disapproval. He would slink into the kitchen, look shamefaced, and in a defensive, exaggerated way, insist that he was thirstier than the whole world. When Sidney asked his mother during dinner whether any monsters live upstairs, his mother suddenly understood that Sidney was frightened at night and that the comfort of touching base with his protecting parents outweighed the discomfort of their disapproval.

Generally, there are important emotional factors that drive a child to be willing to endure the unpleasant consequences associated with negative attention seeking behavior. If a parent ever feels that their child is seeking such attention on a regular basis in a variety of situations, they may have noted an important warning sign that something is troubling their child. Under those circumstances, we recommend that parents consider two possibilities. One possibility is that their child has been over-indulged and therefore has not developed age appropriate skills, autonomy, and independence. The other, and more likely possibility, is that he or she is feeling emotionally overwhelmed for any number of reasons.

Although this is difficult for parents to do, we ask them to experience their child’s attention seeking behavior as an opportunity. Regressions have reasons, and the excessive need for attention can be an opportunity for parents to feel with their child and see the world through their eyes – the key to being helpful to a child.