

LADC Behavior Handout



Selective Attention

Learn how to use your attention effectively to shape your child's behavior.

Remember,
Where
Attention Goes
Behavior
Grows!

Selective Attention

Often parents begin to notice that their child is engaging in a lot of attention seeking behaviors. They will say that it seems like their child doesn't care whether they get positive attention or an angry parent, they still enjoy engaging in those behaviors. The phrase "Where Attention Goes, Behavior Grows" helps to highlight why their behavior continues to happen, even when they are "getting in trouble" for it.

Any reaction to the child's behavior is attention. If the function of your child's behavior is to get attention, then any form of attention will strengthen and increase that behavior. This newsletter will talk about the very important strategy of selective attention, also known as ignoring. This strategy can be very effective in reducing unwanted behaviors, if used consistently and paired with positive attention for appropriate behavior.

Often parents think that if they ignore their child's behavior, they will be thought of as a bad parent or others will wonder why they aren't doing anything to "stop" their child. It is helpful to remember that selective attention or ignoring is an active method of reducing your child's behavior by controlling your attention given, which is very meaningful to your child. When choosing to begin ignoring your child's behavior, it could be helpful to often remind yourself that you are doing what is necessary to shape and change your child's behavior for long-term benefits. This will help to reframe your mindset when concerned about the short-term reactions of other adults around you. Parents also worry that they could emotionally damage their child by ignoring them. Remember, you aren't ignoring them, you are ignoring their negative behaviors. Read on about the importance of using your positive attention between your uses of selective attention.

Selective Attention Continued

Behaviors You Can Successfully Reduce with Selective Attention

It is important to note that not all behaviors can be shaped or reduced when being ignored. A good rule is that you don't want to ignore any behaviors that are destructive or aggressive, as those may have a different behavioral function and wouldn't improve when ignored.

Additionally, you don't want to ignore those behaviors as you want to maintain a safe environment for all. The following behaviors are common examples of behaviors that are great to ignore:

- Angry mood
- Argues
- Baby Talk
- Bangs Head
- Puts things in their mouth
- Clingy
- Demanding
- Doesn't answer questions
- Lies
- Grabs things
- Talking Loudly
- Swearing
- Sassiness
- Screaming
- Rough play with toys
- Stubborn
- Uncooperative
- Whines
- Interrupts
- Temper tantrums
- Difficulties waiting patiently

What Selective Attention/Ignoring Looks Like

Selective attention takes many forms and depending on the situation, you can decide what method is more effective for your family. The more active form of ignoring is to just walk away from the situation or get involved in something else. Often if parents begin talking out loud about what they redirected their attention to or begin talking to someone else, it is clearly shown that parents are removing their attention.

Another more direct approach could be saying something like, "I am going to wait to help you until I hear it asked in a nice way" and then you get busy with something else.

Some more subtle ways to ignore include staying silent, turning your eyes away, turning your back to the situation, or make the new activity you are engaging in really fun while you wait. One important part of selective attention that parents forget about is that you need to be aware of your facial expressions, as often children can still look for your reaction when you are angry about something they did.

Remember, angry facial expressions can still be attention and sometimes let your child know that they got your attention and bugged you.

Which Behaviors Could You Begin to Utilize Selective Attention with to Reduce the Effectiveness of those Behaviors?

Selective Attention Strategies Continued

Consistency

One very important factor to consider before beginning to ignore a behavior is that you don't want to begin to ignore a behavior if you are not able to be consistent and ignore it every time it occurs; otherwise you strengthen the behavior even more. Sometimes behaviors get worse before they get better as your child is trying their last big efforts to get the attention they used to get, because that behavior used to work for them. Therefore, if you ignore the behavior for 10 minutes but then you decide you can't ignore it anymore, you just made the behavior worse. Now your child will have learned that they just need to always do the behavior for 10 minutes and then parent gives in; therefore, they will often do that behavior for longer periods of time consistently. Thus, if you want to reduce a behavior through ignoring, you need to make sure that once you start, you are able to ignore until your child has stopped the behavior.

Reinforcement for the Positive Opposite Behavior

Another very important component to making selective attention work in reducing your child's unpleasant behaviors is to use labeled praise statements for when your child displays the positive opposite of the unpleasant behavior. You need to provide them with alternative means of getting your attention; otherwise, if you just ignore all of their behavior, they will go back to displaying the inappropriate behavior as from learning history, that has been more successful for them in getting attention. For example, if your child uses baby talk sometimes, instead of saying "talk in your big boy voice", you would just ignore your child's request that was in the baby voice. However, you need to catch your child as soon as they switch to a calm or "5-year-old" voice. You can give a labeled praise such as "I love hearing your 5-year-old voice, it makes it so much easier to understand what you are wanting". You want to catch them displaying the appropriate behavior as much as you can, even in situations when they haven't yet used the baby voice. Remember, "Where Attention Goes, Behavior Grows". We want to grow their positive behaviors by giving lots of attention to those behaviors and ignoring the negative behaviors.

Example Positive Opposite Behaviors to Praise

Inappropriate Verbal Expression

- Big girl/boy voice
- Calmly
- Nicely
- Politely
- Using Manners
- Using words to say what they need
- Quietly
- Patiently
- Indoor Voice

Interrupting/Attention Seeking Behavior

- Letting others talk
- Listening
- Waiting patiently
- Taking turns
- Tapping someone's arm gently
- Saying "excuse me"

Attention Problems/Over Active Behaviors

- Attentive
- Calmness
- Concentrating
- Following Directions
- Making good decisions
- Sitting calmly
- Taking their time
- Waiting patiently

Opposition/Anger

- Calmly
- Gently
- Using words
- Nicely
- Sharing
- Taking turns
- Calm body
- Waiting
- Patiently
- Kindly
- Listening
- Quickly