



Paying Attention so Attention Pays Off

Attention from caregivers is a powerful motivator for young children, so being strategic with your attention is one of the best ways to improve behavior and teach new skills. You can watch a video on this topic clicking this [link](#) or scanning the above QR code with your mobile device.

Selective Ignoring

- **Resist responding.** It's often tempting to scold or attempt to reason with kids when they engage in annoying or disruptive behaviors, but this kind of attention can backfire and make those behaviors happen more. Instead, try to give as little attention as possible to minor misbehavior.
- **Figure out what behaviors to ignore.** These are behaviors that might be designed to get reactions from you like whining, name calling, tantrums, and yelling.
- **Ignore the behavior you don't like.** This can look like turning your back, resisting arguing or negotiating, or just waiting out disruptive behaviors.
 - Remember, you are ignoring the specific behavior, not ignoring your child. As soon as the misbehavior ends, attention comes right back.

Special Attention

- **Attend to what you like.** Ignoring misbehavior is only one part of using attention strategically. It's even more important to use attention to encourage more good behaviors.
- **Catch your child being good.** Look for any chance to notice positive behavior that you like and make sure you acknowledge it somehow.
- **Be proactive.** If you are busy with work or household tasks and kids aren't getting attention for long stretches, they may learn to start misbehaving to get that attention. If you can take a quick break to praise them for behaving well and give some extra attention, it might save you a tantrum later on.
- **Use physical touch.** Giving hugs, kisses, pats on the back, tussles of the hair, and sitting close gives your child positive attention.

Other Tips for Strategic Attention

- **When in doubt, wait it out.** At first, kids might act out more if they notice you ignoring misbehavior. This is because they're trying to figure out how to get the reaction they're looking for. If you can be consistent and keep ignoring, kids will learn more appropriate ways to get attention.
- **Safety first.** Sometimes ignoring is not a good option. Unsafe or dangerous behavior, like hitting or running somewhere dangerous should not be ignored, but you should respond as calmly as possible. You can also see our information on Time-out as a way to improve dangerous or destructive behaviors.
- **Seize the moment!** Any time your child is playing quietly or generally behaving, it's the perfect time to give positive attention. Providing special attention right away will help your child understand the connection between their behavior and your attention.

Prep for Success

To be ready to use strategic attention effectively, parents should think about what behaviors they want to praise, what behaviors they want to ignore, and what behaviors can't be ignored. Filling in the worksheet below will help parents be ready when the time comes to use these skills!

Behaviors my child does that can be ignored: Write down the very specific behaviors your child does that you find annoying, obnoxious, or otherwise irritating that you think may really be about getting reactions from others or testing limits:

What will "ignoring" look like? Write down what you will do. Will you turn your back, will you walk a few steps away? Will you act like nothing is going on? Will you give one warning (e.g., "I can't help you when you whine like that") and then ignore?

What behaviors can't be ignored? Write down the behaviors your child does that you think are too unsafe or hurtful to be ignored or aren't about getting a reaction so ignoring won't work. Ignoring also may not work if attention is the goal of the misbehavior. For example, ignoring a child who is getting into a cookie jar probably won't work because they're not getting in the jar to see your reaction; they're doing it to get the cookie!
