

[Giving Your Child Effective Attention!](#)

As an Early Childhood educator, I have learned that ATTENTION is a survival need- not a manipulation of adults.

After World War II, orphans living in a clean, hygienic and basically attentive facility did not thrive. In fact, almost half of infants died, despite apparently having all basic needs met. It turned out that the infants needed a **meaningful relationship with a caring, and involved adult** in order to survive, grow and thrive. Since then, we have learned that Human Growth Hormone (HGH) is released in a manner directly proportional to the amount of caring attention the child receives.

How many times have you said, “Oh, s/he just wants attention!”

YES!

S/he does just want attention and s/he legitimately needs it.

The power of the attention children get is that whatever you pay attention to is a behavior that is reinforced – that is, behavior the adult notices and responds to is more likely to be repeated again than ignored or unnoticed behaviors.

Be honest ... when do you give the most attention and the most focused and intense attention?

When children are acting out or showing MIS-behaviors – right? So, each time your child does something you DON'T want to see again, you reinforce the behavior by strongly reacting to it, right?

Oops! Did you ever realize this? I didn't as a parent. I heard myself yelling,

“How many times have I told you ... ?”

Well, the more times I noticed that behavior and responded strongly, the more likely my children were to repeat it. I was a busy mom. I worked, ran the household, had friends, and the easiest people to ignore [at times] and the most annoying [at times] were my little children.



The odd thing, hard for adults to remember is that giving unpleasant or negative attention will NOT eliminate the behavior. Rather, it strengthens it. The intensity of reaction and the reliable immediate response are the most effective in making behavior occur again because – back to the top – children legitimately need attention to survive.

Nature has equipped children to do statistics and a quick analysis of their own experiences. When do they ‘bug’ you most?

When you are on the phone?

When you want to focus on shopping?

When you are chatting with another adult?

Ahhh – yes, when they don’t have your attention.



So, what does this mean? It means that you DO have to give **strong focused attention when something has happened that you like and want to see again**. Catch them doing what you want! Make meaningful, descriptive statements about their efforts – not outcomes, when they are engaged in constructive, creative, artistic endeavors. Make meaningful descriptive statements about cooperation, about helping others, about being able to spend a few minutes alone without interrupting your phone call.

Create those quality moments or better yet, minutes of just attending to your child or focusing on what s/he wants following WANTED BEHAVIOR.

If you do this consistently for a few days you will begin to see changes. Children want nothing more than your approval. If you show that approval by giving focused and meaningful attention to constructive behaviors, they will repeat those behaviors.

There are a few things happening when you do this. Children are reassured that you ‘see’ them—really see them—and what they are doing. It forces you to pay attention to specifically what they are doing and to think enough about it to make an intelligent comment about it.

The comments help children to think in more complex ways about their activity and capability and may even enlarge their vocabulary. When they get the attention

they need, they will give back by lowering the demand that comes out of feelings of neglect.

Notice that I have used the phrase: **descriptive feedback** above. This is **NOT PRAISE!**

Saying “Good Job” without saying what you are approving leads to two conclusions by the child:

- you really are not paying attention, you are just getting me off your back;
- something I did was a ‘good job’, but I don’t know what, so I will have to do a number of things I did recently to test which one was ‘good’.

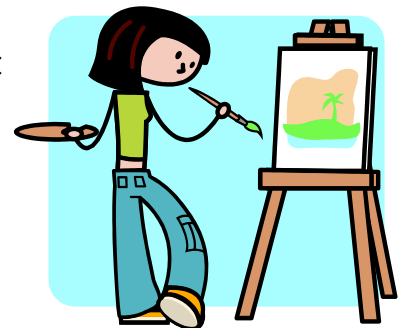
Descriptive feedback shows that you actually paid attention to what the child did. It means you noticed the effort or time spent and commented on the effort rather than judged the outcome.

How do I do this, you ask?

Really pay attention to what the child did and avoid using judgment words like: good, great, beautiful, bad, ugly, etc. In my Early Childhood Development classes, students are not allowed to use the words “good” or “bad”. This is the rule to force them to use more descriptive language that has shared meaning. What does ‘good’ mean? What does ‘bad’ mean? We all have different values and ideas regarding those ideas.

If the child has made a drawing or painting, you can say:

“Wow, I see that you put a lot of time into that art. I can count five different colors in the one painting. I wonder what you were thinking when you combined those two colors?”

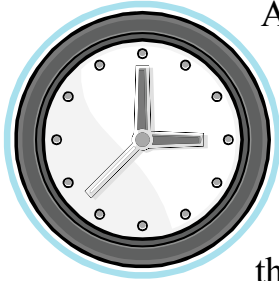


OR

“You did that painting really fast. There are some famous artists that also use mostly one color just like you did here. Is that color special to you in some way?”

If the child has been kind to someone else:

“I feel so proud of you when you are patient with your sister/brother. I know he/she can be annoying sometimes, but I see you are getting more patient now.”
Etc., etc., etc.



Adults often feel they don't have the time to slow down and focus on the child. However, it is when you have the least time that it is most important. If you provide that 15 minutes of quality, focused attention –sometimes called ‘want-nothing-time’ by experts like Magda Gerber – you will **earn** half an hour without interruption following that 15 minutes. If you do this regularly, the rare times you cannot pay attention will pass almost unnoticed by your child because he/she is not *hungry* for attention.

Be sure to tell your child, “WOW, you let me focus on my project/work/phone call for a long time. I really appreciate that you are able to wait now. That is an important skill for people as they get older and it looks like you are learning it.”

Don't forget that children always do the best they can, just like you try to do. When they do something wrong it is more likely because they lack the specific skills to do it right than to annoy you. Giving descriptive feedback to children of any age or capability becomes a ‘teachable moment’ rather than an argument or power struggle.

Discipline means to teach. Teach them the skills by demonstrating them. Patience with their challenges and belief in their ability to learn will result in cooperation, motivation and high self-esteem.

By Kathy Kelley



Kathy is an Early Childhood Development Instructor at Chabot Community College in Hayward, California. She has three children and even the baby is off to college – she always wishes she had some of that childhood time back again. Kathy can be reached at kkelley@samplehead.com.

Posted by Ellen C. Braun in [Parenting Advice](#), [Self Esteem](#), [Effective Communication](#), [Disciplining Children](#)