Attention Is a Window, Not the Function: Why We Don’t Have to Ignore Children to Change Behavior

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



One of the consequences of thinking about attention, not as a function, but as a window into the function, is that it changes how we design interventions for behavior. Because at no time are we telling a child that we will not give them attention.

If a child is in the room, that child deserves attention.

Now, that doesn’t mean we have to pay attention to the things the child wants us to pay attention to. But we can pay attention to the child’s life. We can pay attention to lots of things, even while we’re deliberately not reinforcing a particular behavior.

And I think that’s an important distinction.

The Problem With Planned Ignoring

Many years ago, we came up with this idea in the field of behavior and teaching called planned ignoring. When a child starts screaming and yelling, you turn your head away, you act calm, and you don't pay any attention to the child. When the child stops crying, you turn back toward the child, hold them, talk to them, and give them attention again. If the child starts screaming, you turn away again.

The idea is that if a behavior is maintained by attention, you can withhold that attention and place the behavior on extinction. Over time, the child learns that they only get your attention when they're not screaming.

Now, the idea there is sound, at least in terms of the behavioral principle. If attention is reinforcing a behavior, withholding that reinforcement can reduce the behavior over time.

The problem is that it's really unnatural.

It doesn't feel right. And you're ignoring a child.

We have very limited time with our children, and I think we ought to be thoughtful about how we spend that time. If a child is in the room with us, I don't believe that we should have to withdraw our attention from that child simply because the child is engaging in behavior we don't want to reinforce.

There is a difference between not reinforcing a behavior and not attending to a child. And I think planned ignoring has sometimes caused us to confuse the two.

Now, there are certainly times when the kind of attention we want to give our children is shared attention on something else. Or we want to focus our child's attention on something that isn't us. We may intentionally leave a child alone so that they can work independently, play independently, solve a problem, or learn to do something without our involvement.

But that is intentional and deliberate, and it is not a consequence for problem behavior. It is to help the child do something, accomplish something, or learn something.

That's very different from turning away from a child because the child is upset.

This idea of planned ignoring has never sat right with me. And I think I understand why now.

It's because I don't believe attention is ever the end of the function.

Attention Is a Way of Communicating a Want or a Need

Attention is a window into what the child wants or needs. The child is doing things to get me to attend to that want or need, and once I can see what it is, I can address it.

That changes the entire interaction.

Instead of asking, "How do I keep from giving this child attention?" I can ask, "What does this child want or need me to attend to?"

And once I understand that, I have choices.

I can say yes. I can say no. Or I can encourage the child to wait.

There is a place for all three of those responses, and none of them requires me to withhold my attention from the child.

Sometimes the Answer Is Yes

Sometimes the child wants or needs something that I can give them. Perhaps they need help with a task. Perhaps they're tired and need a break. Perhaps they want to spend time with me, or they need reassurance, or they need an opportunity to move around.

If I understand what the child wants or needs, and it's something appropriate that I can provide, I can say yes.

And sometimes that will stop the problem behavior almost immediately, because the child gets what they need.

Now, that doesn't mean I have to give the child something as a consequence of screaming or hitting. I can still be intentional about teaching the child to ask appropriately, and I can arrange opportunities to meet those needs before problem behavior occurs.

But I don't have to pretend that I don't see the child. I don't have to turn my head away or act as though the child isn't there.

I can pay attention to the child, recognize the need, and respond appropriately.

Sometimes the Answer Is No

Of course, sometimes the answer has to be no.

A child may want something that isn't available, isn't appropriate, or isn't safe. They may want to leave school when they need to stay. They may want something that belongs to someone else. They may want to avoid an activity that they need to learn to complete.

In those situations, I can say no.

And saying no may cause the child to become frustrated or upset. That's part of learning, too. Children have to learn that they cannot always have what they want, and they have to learn how to tolerate disappointment.

But I can say no while continuing to pay attention to the child.

I can acknowledge that the child is disappointed. I can remain calm. I can help the child understand what is happening and what they can do next. I can support the child through the frustration without changing my answer.

I don't have to withdraw my attention in order to maintain a limit.

In fact, I think there is something important about a child learning that an adult can say no and still be kind, still be present, and still be willing to help.

The child may not get what they want, but they don't lose the adult in the process.

Sometimes the Answer Is Wait

And then there is the answer in the middle: wait.

Sometimes the child can have what they want or need, but not right now. Perhaps the adult is busy. Perhaps another child is taking a turn. Perhaps an activity is coming later in the day, or the child needs to finish something first.

Waiting requires some coaching.

For many children, waiting is difficult, particularly when they don't know how long they'll have to wait or whether the thing they want will actually become available. They may need reassurance, a clear expectation, or help finding something else to do in the meantime.

And again, none of that requires withholding attention.

I can tell the child that I understand what they want. I can explain when it will be available. I can help them wait, and I can reinforce the behaviors that make waiting successful.

The child is learning to tolerate a delay, but they're not being taught that the adult will stop attending to them when they're having difficulty.

That's an important difference.

We Can Withhold Reinforcement Without Withholding Ourselves

I think this is where viewing attention as a window rather than the end of the function becomes so valuable.

When we identify a behavior as attention-maintained, we sometimes move too quickly to the conclusion that the intervention should be to withhold attention. We turn away, avoid eye contact, and wait for the child to stop engaging in the behavior before we interact again.

But what if we approached the situation differently?

What if we continued to attend to the child while being selective about the behaviors we reinforced? What if we looked beyond the immediate attention the behavior produces and tried to understand what the child wants us to recognize, provide, change, or help them tolerate?

We might discover that the child needs something we can provide. We might discover that the child wants something we have to deny. Or we might discover that the child needs help learning to wait.

In each case, we can respond intentionally. We can maintain expectations, teach appropriate communication, reinforce replacement behaviors, and avoid allowing problem behavior to produce outcomes that we don't want to reinforce.

And we can do all of that without ignoring the child.

This doesn't mean that attention cannot function as a reinforcer. Of course it can. The behavioral principles are still important, and we need to understand the consequences that maintain behavior.

But I think we make a mistake when we treat identifying attention as the function as though we've reached the end of our understanding. Attention tells us something important about the behavior, but it doesn't necessarily tell us everything we need to know about the child.

It is a window into something deeper.

And when we look through that window, we may find that the most appropriate intervention isn't to withdraw attention at all. It may be to recognize the child's want or need and then respond with one of three very simple answers.

Yes.

No.

Or wait.

There is a place for all three. There is an opportunity for teaching in all three. And none of them requires us to stop attending to a child who needs our help.

We don't have to ignore children to teach them that problem behavior doesn't work. We can teach them better ways to get what they want or need while remaining present, attentive, and kind.

When a Child Needs Attention, Give Them Attention

Now, if we know that a child engages in maladaptive behavior, and it is truly because their want or need is simply attention from adults, then what are we doing?

Let's go ahead and give that child a ton of attention from adults so that they don't feel like they need to seek it in inappropriate ways.

That means catching these students at all times of their lives and talking to them about how well they're doing. Telling them how much we like them. Telling them how glad we are that they're here with us. And showing them how much value they add to the part of the world they inhabit.

We need to make sure that this child is not truly lacking in attention as a nutrient. Because attention is something children need, and we should be generous with it.

Now, we still have to address what happens when the child engages in problem behavior to get our attention, particularly when there is a better way to get that attention. And that almost always comes back to communication. The child needs to learn how to communicate.

And the way we teach a child to communicate is by reinforcing communication. We first give the child a way to communicate. We teach them to use that way to communicate, and then we do our part to make sure that their communication is honored, encouraged, valued, and rewarded.

So when the child wants attention, they now have a way to get attention that is appropriate, meaningful, encouraged, and within the bounds of most settings.

And that's really the point. We don't want children to learn that attention is something they have to fight for, or that they have to engage in problem behavior to receive it. We want them to know that they

matter, that we are glad they're here, and that there are appropriate ways to let us know when they need us.

The answer to a child who needs attention is not less attention. It's more attention, given generously throughout the day, and a better way for the child to ask for it when they need it.

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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