

SECOND EDITION

Attention Seeking

A Complete Guide for Teachers

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Chapter 1

Introduction to attention seeking

Chapter summary

This chapter:

- Introduces the idea of attention seeking behaviour as a recognisable pattern of misbehaviour in class
- Introduces the key question 'What do they appear to gain from behaving this way?'
- Provides an extended example of attention seeking behaviour
- Highlights the importance of taking account of teacher stress in dealing with such patterns
- Introduces the 'punishment paradox'
- Introduces a guide for identifying attention seeking behaviour patterns – the teacher's feelings of irritation
- Discusses a working definition of attention seeking
- Introduces the hidden medical model that adults may be carrying
- Illustrates the phenomenon of attention seeking through under-reacting

N.B. First, briefly refer back to the 'ten steps programme' overview at the beginning of the book, to help you keep track of the plan for the pupil you are concerned about.

Sounds familiar? The attention seeking child in class

As an introduction to the topic of attention seeking in class, it can be very instructive first of all to call upon your own experience. One problem, however, in considering attention seeking behaviours is that almost anything could fall into this category – from nose picking to screaming, as the vast variety of behaviours displayed by Barry illustrates later. There is no simple checklist of 'symptoms'. A clearer definition of attention seeking is explored later in the chapter, for now we will concentrate on 'irritating behaviours that get attention'.

Box 1.1 presents an observation of Norman Young during one English lesson. He was constantly seeking attention in a variety of obvious and not so obvious ways. One set of his behaviours took some time to conceptualise; we called it 'playing drums'. Imagine a child sitting at his desk, jiggling about, moving all four limbs in rhythm and making a 'tss, tss, tss' cymbal noise. (It is worth pointing out here that he was not 'hyperactive'. For some teachers he would sit and work quite happily – this issue is discussed later.) The trick here is not to look at the individual behaviours but to try to see the pattern – the common thread uniting

them is the way they can all potentially draw a response from the teacher. We will discuss this later in the chapter.

Box 1.1 Observation of Norman, age 12, during an English lesson in high school

- 10.03 Crawls under TV towards cupboard. Flicks Darren's chair. Shouts at Luke.
- 10.04 Playing drums.
- 10.05 Flicking ruler.
- 10.06 Playing drums.
- 10.07 Playing drums.
- 10.08 Working.
- 10.09 Playing drums. Shouts out 'Have you got to write the question?'
- 10.10 Giggling. Chatting. Playing drums.
- 10.11 Staring round. Chatting. Odd noises.
- 10.12 Chatting (continues for 8 minutes).
- 10.21 Chatting. Giggling. Knocks Julia's pencils off desk. Puts tongue out.
- 10.22 Working.
- 10.23 Knocks Julia's pencil case off again. Throws Andy's book. Coughs.
- 10.24 Shouting at Darren. Throws pencil case.
- 10.25 Shouts out 'Do you know who my uncle is?'
- 10.26 Scribbles on Lee's book. Makes loud 'oo ah' noise. Pulls mouth to side with fingers.
- 10.27 Pulls mouth to side. Makes loud pig noises. Shouts to Luke.
- 10.28 Stares round. Plays drums.
- 10.29 Plays drums.
- 10.30 Stares round. Ruler in mouth. Knocks Julia's pencil case on floor. Plays drums. Sings. Whistles.

Attention seeking behaviour is immensely frustrating for the teacher:

He blocks me from all the other children. I've tried all sorts of ways of dealing with him and I get nowhere. He absorbs my energy, my attention. I give him so much and he gives nothing back. I start off feeling compassionate, I'd like to spend more time with him, then frustrated, then angry. He drains all the compassion from me. I feel like screaming. I feel like it's my fault. I'm just drained at the end of it. (Art teacher discussing Michael Platt, age 13, in high school).

The secret in trying to understand such patterns is not to ask the question 'Why do they do it?' but to ask instead 'What does the pupil appear to gain from behaving this way?' As McManus (1995) points out, asking a 'Why?' question often leads to a pessimistic answer such as 'It's the home background; what can I do about it?' If we consider instead the function that the behaviour serves for the pupil (by looking at what the pupil might be gaining) we then discover clues to the practical steps we can take:

Kim seeks adult attention most of the time; this can either be by good behaviour, seeking praise for her work, or poor behaviour by making loud outbursts against others or leaping around the classroom. (Teacher's comment on Kim Thomas, age 10).

Barry Sheen, age 7, gives a good example of the thousand and one ways children can act to gain attention in class.

Mrs Lyons, Barry's teacher, described him as an intelligent boy but one who seemed unable or unwilling to follow instructions. If she said 'walk' he would run; if she said 'line up' he would continue writing or playing; in PE if she said 'jump' he would skip.

Barry found it hard to co-operate and play with other children and had little idea of how to share. Generally, whoever he was working with or playing with would complain that Barry was cheating. If Barry was allowed to play in a group there was a constant stream of children complaining about him, coming to the teacher's desk, saying that he was snatching toys, pulling things apart etc. One of his favourite tricks was to bend other children's fingers and either kick, nip or punch them.

Mrs Lyons mentioned several problems Barry displayed when working (it should be pointed out that the work was well within his ability). He clearly had heard instructions yet he regularly carried them out incorrectly. This rapidly drew the teacher over to him. Whenever Mrs Lyons spoke to the class, Barry would question and challenge her. When she said, 'Let's draw some people' Barry shouted out, 'Why do we have to draw?' When his teacher was out in the yard preparing to ring the bell, Barry would immediately turn to run off. He would eventually saunter back to join the line.

When lining up in class he could not stand still. He would jump up and down, wave his arms about or run out of the line or change his position. When at the teacher's desk he would make a variety of noises: blow raspberries, click his tongue, break wind, burp, stamp his feet, thump the desk, anything to cause a disruption.

He seemed unable to keep his hands to himself, he was constantly fiddling with things, poking into other children's books and papers (as well as the teacher's), prising pictures off the wall, poking the tops of milk bottles, picking up other people's equipment and often throwing it across the room.

If he was sent out of the room for being naughty or allowed to go to the toilet, he would tear down displays, go through other children's coat pockets, throw the coats on the floor or mix them up on the pegs.

In PE, Barry shouted and pushed all the way to the hall. He jumped under the safety rail instead of using the steps and pushed other children around. When told to stand apart from the other children Barry blew raspberries and pulled faces. When he was eventually sent out, he stood at the door pulling faces until he was told off again. On one occasion he held a sheet of paper in front of his face. When told by the head and various other teachers to lower it, Barry simply raised it further.

Mrs Lyons said that he was a lovely child in the one-to-one setting and could be very endearing and affectionate and would also admit his mistakes. She also observed that 'He just enjoys winding me up' and that he just seemed 'to see how far he could go in disrupting the class'. She added finally 'I sometimes wonder if I am watching him too much.' She was in fact quite close to realising herself that she had fallen into the trap that good, caring teachers fall in to – responding to the misbehaviour of a child whom she was very concerned about. Her very strength became her weakness.

Programme

First week

1. Fighting at playtimes was George's most reported 'problem'. The school policy has been changed now as this problem is growing throughout the school. If a child fights he misses out on special time such as extra play sessions on the computer. George immediately missed three sessions but hasn't lost any in the past few days. When he hits back in the playground it seems to be other children starting the trouble, not him. The rest of the class have confirmed this.
2. His most irritating habit was snorting and picking his nose. I tried to ignore this but was unable to. I decided to warn him to use a tissue and if he did it again I would knock two class points off without saying anything. He rarely picks his nose now and 'snorts' much less.
3. A number of children leave their seat unnecessarily when they should be working. I have started a system now and I write the child's name on the board if they leave their seats. Reward for those who don't. Everyone got extra free time this week!
4. I am encouraging George to bring things of interest into school. All children receive class points for this now. Whenever George is behaving well I try to use him as a 'good example'. I now give out points to those who tidy up well after an activity. George responds well to this reward. George's attitude towards me and the other children has improved a good deal since I have been giving him a lot more attention. The other children seem to be 'on his side' more now instead of pointing out his poor behaviour.

One week later

George continues to lose privileges for fighting or insolence to dinner ladies, particularly lunch times. Little snorting now. Getting out of seat has reduced.

One year later

Does not snort. Does not pick his nose. Does not spoil others' work. Mainly stays on seat. Still occasional aggression at break time and in class. Some tale-telling and collecting equipment. Overall, settled and acceptable in class.

<p>Case example 2 - Pete Tolan, age 6: a case fragment illustrating a brief, practical summary record from year 1</p>
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Pete Tolan's psychologist, was following the guidelines of the first edition of this book, with many new ideas of her own. Her consultation record is a tightly focused model of careful planning, covering all aspects of Pete's behaviour with specific suggestions. Pete is age 6.

Points to note

- The new focus on what Pete was gaining from his misbehaviours.
- The emphasis on consistency of response from all staff.
- The new approach of 'catch him being good'.
- Praise for even small positive behaviours before the negatives have time to develop.
- Careful planned ignoring alongside low key interventions.

- Use of visual clues and visual timetables.
- Teaching what is meant by, e.g., 'good sitting'.
- Switching teacher attention from annoying behaviours to their opposites.
- Rewarding the whole class.
- Grandma's Rule.
- Involving parents and ensuring rewards are effective.
- Clear targets and instructions.
- Use of social stories (see end of chapter).
- Use of 'task completed' checklists.
- A planned response to his biting.
- A distraction free personal 'office'.

Box 8.2 Pete Tolan's psychologist's consultation record

Pupil Name: Peter Tolan		CONSULTATION RECORD	
DoB: 07.01.99	Age: 6		YEAR: 1
School: Sands First School		Date of review: 13.01.05	
<p><u>Present:</u> Jane Corbutt class teacher Sarah Watson classroom assistant Kate Usher educational psychologist</p>			
<p><u>Issue to be addressed:</u> I was asked to briefly observe Pete during literacy and to provide some reassurance and ideas to help support Pete's class teacher with his behaviour in class.</p>			
<p><u>Action undertaken:</u> 20 minute observation:</p> <p>Pete sat appropriately on the carpet for 10 minutes, waiting for the lesson to begin (other children at the toilet).</p> <p>When the lesson started, Pete continued to sit appropriately for the first 2 minutes of the lesson. Thereafter there was a series of behaviours – lying down, running around the classroom, pulling chairs, pulling at his support assistant's necklace, emptying pencil sharpenings, running out of the classroom. Classroom support assistant was reacting to Pete, trying to make him conform.</p> <p>When the rest of the children moved to their table to complete their work, Pete put the book/rulers on his head, sat under the table, tried to bite his support assistant etc.</p>			
<p><u>Next step:</u> Suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rather than asking 'Why does he do it?' ask instead, 'What does Pete appear to gain from behaving this way?' Consider the function that the behaviour serves for him (it brings him attention). This will help inform the practical steps that can be taken. <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Continued)</i></p>			