

If time is tight:

Highlight Natural
Patterns of
Attention

Ask the parent whether the child gets more attention when he or she is behaving well or behaving poorly. The parent should realise that bad behaviours naturally attract more attention. The idea is to reverse this pattern and to try to start noticing good behaviours when they happen. When children are behaving appropriately (playing nicely with a sibling, colouring quietly) parents take the opportunity to get on with chores/making calls etc. Parents do not positively reinforce behaviour that they would like to see more of – instead they ignore the behaviour. A parent may be more likely to drop what they are doing to attend to bickering than peaceful play. This inadvertently teaches children that inappropriate behaviour is a good way of gaining attention and children quickly learn that an effective way of gaining their parent's attention is to misbehave, cry or fight with a sibling.

Example script

Have you ever had to interrupt your phone conversation to correct, reprimand, or discipline your child for being disruptive? Of course! Most parents have. But have you ever interrupted your phone conversation to praise or attend to your child for not disrupting the call but instead playing quietly nearby?

Few parents will indicate that they have actively taken time out of an activity to praise their child for good behaviour. The point is that if children want to receive parental attention, they are often more successful in getting it by being disruptive, particularly if the parent is paying attention to someone else. Suggest to the parent that if the situation were reversed, such that parental attention were given for positive behaviour, the child would increase his or her independent play.

Focus on Independent Play	<p>Point out how, like follow-through, independent play is an especially important behaviour. Suggest to the parent that in order to decrease the extent to which the child disrupts him or her to get attention the parent first needs to start attending to the child's independent play very frequently. Tell the parent that the frequency of this attention can be gradually reduced as the child spends longer periods of time without disrupting the parent when the parent is engaged in other activities.</p> <p>Praise for independent play has several steps:</p> <p>The parent should assign the child some desirable activity to perform while the parent is occupied.</p> <p>Praise should be issued about once every minute at first. Over time, these intervals can be lengthened. The instruction to stay in the desirable activity can be repeated as well.</p> <p>The parent should think of these as "training periods" during which the main purpose is not for the parent to cook a meal or read a magazine, but to teach the child how to play independently.</p>
ACTIVITY Praising Independent Play	<p>Engage in a role-play exercise with the parent (adapt for telephone delivery). Instruct the parent to issue an instruction to you (the child) to play independently while he or she (the parent) reads a magazine. When role-playing this technique with the parent, pay close attention to the frequency with which the parent provides praise and the type of praise given. Provide the parent with feedback on his or her use of the technique following the role-play.</p>
Debrief after Activity	<p>Discuss the parent's reaction to using this technique in the role-play situation. Suggest to the parent that many parents abide by the philosophy of "let sleeping dogs lie." Essentially, many parents think that it is best to not pay attention to their child when he or she is behaving quietly and appropriately, for fear that the parent's attention will only spark new occurrences of undesirable behaviour. In fact, the opposite is true: paying attention to, and encouraging the child's independent play from time to time wi</p>

Discuss Concerns Review common concerns that parents may have. These include:
Some parents feel that their attention will trigger new
episodes of negative behaviour. For one thing, the child

Send the materials
for the next
session

Helpful Tips:

For children who are doing well with independent play, this module can be presented in brief form and combined with another skill (e.g., Active Ignoring) in the same session.

For parents who may be reluctant to praise children just for doing "normal things," it can be helpful to use the analogy of work for the parents: *Imagine if you received a payslip only during a workweek in which you did something extraordinary. People receive a payslip for doing the basic requirements of their job. For children, praise is the currency, so it is important to praise them just for having regular, appropriate behaviour (like buckling their seatbelts, or sitting straight at the dinner table) as well as for exceptional behaviour.*

How's Your Style?

Did you praise often?

Did you review often, by asking questions?

Did you simplify the steps as needed?

Did your pace match the child's? (Yes/No)