

Ignoring and Distracting

Children and adults need what Eric Byrne called ‘strokes’ – bits of social and emotional contact that let us know we exist as people, that we have a social context, that other people like us, that some of them love us, that we are wanted and valued. If we don’t get enough positive strokes, we work for negative ones – any strokes are better than no strokes. Some children seek attention through negative behaviour, and may initially reject positive inputs.

Babies need all the attention they can get if they are to learn to communicate and to be responsive to others. They need to know that another person is there, who will not abandon them. As language and a sense of time passing develop, children become able to wait for things and take turns and so on.

As babies turn into toddlers and young children, it becomes possible to manage attention to help children with their behaviour. For example, if a toddler gets a huge reaction to a tantrum, he is more likely to do it again. Parents sometimes find it helpful not so much to ignore the child as to scale down the amount of reaction they give to the behaviour – to stop the threatening and cajoling and just wait for the tantrum to subside. Some children benefit from being held during tantrums and some don’t – most like a cuddle afterwards.

Battles about food can be lessened by managing attention – instead of pleading with children to eat things, just dish it up and take it away afterwards, without going on and on about it. Food can be very emotional so it can need thinking about, but in a pre-school context managing food related behaviours through managing attention can work well, with the informed consent of parents.

Low or no reaction to some behaviours (ignoring) can be very effective – spitting and swearing can respond well to this treatment. We save our big reactions for the behaviours we want to see, not the ones we don’t want to see.

When children have a history of abuse or neglect, just ignoring can be a cruel thing to do. We need to ignore the behaviour, without ignoring the child – or their needs.

Distracting can be a very useful technique for changing the behaviour of some younger children – it works best when they are cranky because they are a bit tired or a bit bored or have been doing the same thing for a while. A change of scene or activity, or getting a snack ready, or moving from inside to outside or the other way round, can do the trick.

Distracting is not useful when the children are older, or have become firmly fixed on an idea, or when they have gone ‘over the top’. Distracting needs to happen early in the process, not the end.