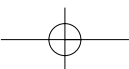
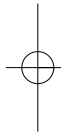
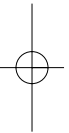


Part I

Practical Steps



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

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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:

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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.

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Attention seeking – the teacher’s stress

If you can identify similar problems to those presented by Barry, then you most likely have had to deal with a pupil who is displaying attention seeking behaviour (strategies to deal with this are covered in later chapters). To emphasise, children behaving in this manner, who require a great deal of attention, can cause their teachers great heartache. In the account below, Debbie Dawson, age 10, is discussed in school with Ros Simpson, her class teacher and the special needs co-ordinator in Middle School:

Ros said, ‘She’s a pain. She breathes for me. She’s hanging onto my clothes, like a constant shadow.’ Ros then went on to say, ‘It’s just attention seeking, pathetic really.’ However, she noted, ‘Your patience wears thin.’ She said that when giving instructions Debbie always asks questions and as soon as Ros has finished talking ‘I turn round and breathe and her hand is up.’

The teacher stated, ‘I couldn’t say she’s got a friend. Nobody wants to let her into the line. She winds everyone up.’

As a result of this Debbie’s table is separated from the other children otherwise, Ros said, ‘When working with them she would irritate them or complain that they were irritating her. They probably did but she probably instigated it.’

Ros noted, ‘At break she is the only one the kids pick on (according to Debbie). She’s always pestering for attention. There is nothing the matter or it’s really trivial. One of these days she’ll go to the office and there will be something wrong with her’ [The implication was that Debbie was ‘crying wolf’]. Ros felt there was a permanent miserable look on her face, ‘she isn’t nice to anyone and no-one is nice to her’. In addition to this she was never in on time. She was late ‘every single morning and she only lives over the road’.

Ros described her as irritating, ‘She’s got me just about tearing my hair out; I can’t think of one redeeming feature. I go home and I think I should be nice to her and I will try really hard with her.’

She also said that Debbie tended to tell ‘whoppers’. ‘She wouldn’t know the truth if it jumped up and hit her. [When something happens] she always has a plausible story, she tells so many lies. She knows the difference between good and bad, she just gets it muddled up.’

Ros had tried to be positive about her. ‘Debbie responds to praise but there are not a lot of occasions when this can be given. She can show a lovely little smile and is often ‘dying to please you’, however, I can’t trust her to be a monitor.’

Ros said, ‘Debbie had a nice relationship with Mrs Nellis last year (but she was not really teaching her much then), it’s when you’ve got her all the time. She irritates everyone, she is late to lessons, she is always late to first lesson and hasn’t got her things. You could forgive her if it was out of the blue but it’s every morning.’

Ros said, ‘I veer between wanting to strangle her and give her a cuddle. She irritates me beyond words, then I get irritated because of that.’ She then also said, ‘she’s not dim’.

Part of the frustration is the teacher’s feeling of helplessness. Normal procedures often appear to have opposite effects. The more the teacher tries, the worse the problem becomes. Miss Vernon, for instance, was quite upset about Martin Cummings, age 8. On his own he was ‘an angelic blond blue-eyed boy’, butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. She said:

Punishments don't seem to bother him, there's nothing you can do to reach him. He wants my reaction, he very much wants to see what I'll do to him next. When I'm busy, that's when he starts. There's no relief – he is very able so I can't put him with the special needs children. I'm making a rod for my own back; he does things you can't ignore.

One of the most distressing features of attention seeking can be the 'punishment paradox' where punishment does not suppress misbehaviour but acts instead as a reinforcement (this issue is discussed again in chapter 6).

For now, try the activity below, to bring to mind patterns of attention seeking you may have experienced in your career, and the possible pay-off for the pupil of these, often bizarre, behaviours.

Activity – what do they gain from behaving this way?

- ⇒ Think back to those children you have found most irritating and annoying to teach over the years, or ask colleagues for their recollections.
- ⇒ Make a brief note of what these children actually did which caused the annoyance (and try to recall your feelings at the time).
- ⇒ Try to answer the question 'What did they gain from behaving this way?'

Attention seeking – a round up

Norman, Michael, Barry and Debbie all demand a great deal of attention. The best guide to identifying such cases is simply your own feelings of irritation or annoyance. As Balson (1982) explains:

If teachers wish to know the purpose of a student's misbehaviour, they must observe their own spontaneous ... reaction ... Whatever teachers feel like doing is precisely what the students want them to do ... for instance a student who seeks attention may come late to class, clown, ask incessant questions, fail to return materials ... some teachers become impatient and annoyed by these behaviours and respond by giving the student the attention he or she desperately needs. (p.78)

This pattern, of playing on the individual sensitive areas of the parent or teacher to get a response, is discussed further in Dreikurs et al. (1982). In this text, the authors ask teachers to look at their '*gut reaction*' of irritation (p.25) to begin to understand the patterns of interaction that arise. There is, of course, a danger in relying on '*gut reaction*' as more than simply an initial guide. Careful observation is needed (see chapter 2). Balson (1982) explores other emotions teachers may commonly experience such as feeling challenged, hurt or helpless. These, he argues, characterise reactions to pupils seeking not attention but power, revenge or withdrawal respectively.

The children can themselves be quite insightful about the situation. Here is Lucy Nugent, age 12, in high school (p.xx), discussing herself and her younger siblings in a step-family:

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I get the most money, Mark and Ben get the most attention. Mum is always helping them. Ben is his [step father's] son, he gets more attention than me.

Neil Robson, age 12, discussing short stories about children (see appendix 1), commented about one example:

He really wanted attention. If the teacher's always busy you do things so she notices you as well.

Debbie, whom we discussed above, describing one child's behaviour in a short story (see appendix 1), said:

She might have wanted attention, people to pet her up and everything – because people at home were not looking after her and there was a new baby.

The child displaying attention seeking behaviour is seen by many teachers as the most common problem in school (Balson 1982). In many texts on behaviour problems the idea of attention seeking appears not at all, or at best fleetingly. However, the Elton committee (DES 1989) reported that it was not getting 'beaten up' which concerned most teachers most of the time, but gradually getting 'ground down' by constant annoyances. Attention seeking interactions are a main cause of stress experienced by teachers.

In isolation many of the examples [of misbehaviour] ... appear to be relatively trivial ... [but such] problems led to a sense of being slowly worn down. (DES 1989, p.254)

Attention seeking – towards a definition

While seeking the attention of others is quite socially acceptable, the term attention seeking is generally reserved for situations where problem behaviour or '*inappropriate attention seeking*' (Armstrong and Drabman 1994, p.44) is seen. However, not all demands for attention should potentially be labelled attention seeking (it's the long term pattern of problem behaviour that counts) and the phrase is also confusingly used, often with infants, simply to refer to quite ordinary procedures of seeking re-assurance or help. In addition, attention seeking may also have been seen in a positive context, such as with the development of humour (Fern 1991; but see Damico and Purkey 1978, on 'class clowns').

There is evidence that attention seeking interactions can lead to very serious difficulties for children, their carers and schools – De Pear (1995) for example illustrates the high rate of occurrence of attention seeking behaviour amongst pupils prior to exclusion from school. Dictionary definitions of attention seeking have been found to be unhelpful; potentially they may allow a limitless collection of behaviours to be included under that label. Reber and Reber (2001, p.62), for instance, have: '*generally, descriptive of any behaviour engaged in for the purpose of securing the attention of others*'.

As a working definition, attention seeking will be taken in this book to refer to those behaviours which, through their very irritating nature, bring a child to the attention of a number of adults in a persistent manner over a lengthy period of time, causing great concern. We would exclude, for instance, the sudden reaction of a child to an upset at

home lasting for a few days or weeks. This definition is slightly modified from that originally used in the first edition by omitting the need to observe the pattern in more than one setting (see Mellor 2005a). The slight change will not materially affect any programmes teachers may wish to carry out; it is of more relevance to researchers.

Unfortunately, the term attention seeking has a pejorative ring to it, with an implication of conscious motivation by the child. Our experience shows that this style is one that the child has adopted over a period of time. The interactions seem to have become more of a habit than a deliberate strategy, although at times a clear intent may be apparent. In any case, a most important vehicle for change is the adult. We cannot simply rely on counselling the child to achieve a solution.

The phrase also conceals the circular nature of the affair, that the adult and child are both locked in an interaction. The child is evidently seeking attention but a more neutral terminology such as **attention needing** might be recommended, although, as this has not gained widespread currency, this book will retain the term attention seeking.

Attention seeking and medical models

Taking account of the very unusual behaviours children sometimes exhibit when trapped into an attention seeking cycle (see for instance the bizarre behaviours displayed by Evan Moore, p.xx) it is often tempting to look for a 'medical' cause. Often a confused mixture of 'explanations' is around. These are sometimes implied rather than stated, and may be mutually contradictory, as we grasp for understanding. Nicholas Noble's mum, for instance, mused:

'He can be good but has "radgie [bad tempered] days. I wonder if it was the food. With his weight and glasses, they're skitting [making fun of] him all the time. Last year his grandma died. A baby died when he was two; was he too young for that to have any influence? He just likes being the centre of attention. Can't we hypnotise him?'

The above quote seems to imply about four or five different underlying explanations lurking in the background of Mrs Noble's mind. As noted above, one very powerful set of explanations commonly hovering around derives from a medical model of misbehaviour. For example, one mother, Mrs Knight, had a 10 year old boy who had been placed on medication because of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She eventually rejected the Ritalin because it affected his appetite, but still retained a medical model, albeit in a rather novel, homeopathic/naturopathic manner. She turned to multivitamins, zinc, Bach flower remedy, IQ tablets, vitamin E and Omega 3. Her comment was:

'It helps to balance both sides of his brain.'* She went on to explain, *'It used to be a constant fight in the morning to get ready. It's better now. Is it his memory ... the Omega 3 helps that.'

Mrs Knight seemed to overlook the fact that her ex-husband had begun to leave her alone, and she herself was feeling stronger. However, after a few weeks of peace from her ex-husband, she found that these alternative remedies were not working. We began some discussions directly aimed at tackling her management of her son's behaviour, which, on

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close inspection, was in fact markedly attention seeking rather than typical of ADHD. The distinction between the two is addressed in chapter 11.

Getting attention by under-reacting

In stark contrast to the torrent of overt out-acting behaviours we have discussed so far, attention seeking can also include rather more low key elements. Some children who need attention discover that one sure-fire route is to 'down tools', play helpless and complain they don't understand. Dedicated teachers, keen for all their pupils to succeed, may easily fall into this trap. Distinguishing genuine learning difficulties from attention seeking in some cases can be quite a challenge (see chapter 2). Charlotte Wright, age 4, and Ann Miller, age 6, illustrate aspects of this pattern of under-reacting at home and school.

Charlotte was taken by her parents to see the family doctor because of 'general lethargy': repeated claims of being tired and lying down: sucking her thumb and pulling her hair, curled up in a baby comfort position (even in the middle of her own birthday party). She was also reported to 'withdraw' – show no interest or enthusiasm in anything, not talk about things / chat / ask questions and not engage with play or sibling. She appeared sad and bored.

The GP ruled out anaemia and said if she were an adult he would be querying mild depression, but not at her age. Charlotte had 11 hours sleep a night regularly. She was well fed and had a house full of toys and books. Her parents were very supportive and she attended a great nursery. On outings she seemed quite 'normal' – asking questions, talking, showing interest.

It turned out there was a new baby in the family and the issue was raised whether Charlotte could be seeking attention in subtle ways. Unfortunately this issue was raised in a rather unsubtle way, at which point the parents were thrown into a frenzy of guilt and worry.

During year 1 Ann Miller had not spoken in class to her teachers or classmates. At home she led her parents a merry dance. We worked on her attention seeking behaviour at home and her parents began to clearly see the pattern which had developed. In fact, Mrs Miller eventually commented that at school Ann 'had them all on a string' – the head teacher, the class teacher, the dinner supervisors, in fact everyone, tried to get Ann to speak. Gradually, as matters settled at home, Ann began to open up at school. The teacher then began to complain she was becoming disruptive with her constant chatter (for further details of Ann's case see Mellor 2000, pp.65–67).

For now, the words of one consultant paediatrician about a 5 year old displaying very attention seeking behaviour seem appropriate:

'It is my impression that his behavioural difficulties are likely to be of an attention seeking nature rather than being due to seizures or other organic brain defect.'

The next chapter considers positive steps to deal with this situation.

KEY PRACTICAL POINT

Ask yourself the question 'What does the pupil appear to gain from behaving this way?'

►► FURTHER READING

For more information on attention seeking generally, analysing the functions of behaviour, its purpose or goal, and the definition of attention seeking, see:

- Balson, M. (1982) *Understanding Classroom Behaviour*. Hawthorn: The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.
- Dreikurs, R., Grunwald, B. and Pepper, F. (1982) *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom: Illustrated teaching techniques* (2nd edn). London: Harper & Row.
- Merrett, F. (1993) *Encouragement Works Best: Positive approaches to classroom management*. London: David Fulton.
- Mellor, N. (2005a) Attention seeking: the paradoxes of an under-researched concept. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 22, 94–107.
- Rogers, B. (2006) *Classroom Behaviour: A practical guide to effective teaching, behaviour management and colleague support* (2nd edn). London: Paul Chapman Publishing (especially chapter 6 on disclosing behavioural goals).

Video of attention seeking in class is unfortunately most notable by its absence. Examples at home, however, are readily displayed in TV programmes such as *Little Angels*, *Teen Angels*, *House of Tiny Tearaways*, *Nanny 911*, *Driving Mum and Dad Mad* and *Supernanny*. See also Christopher Green's videos on 'Toddler Taming' (for example, vol. 1 *Welcome to Toddlerhood* and vol. 2 *Discipline*, available through www.uniview.co.uk).

For the pre-school/early years/child care settings see:

- Glenn, A., Cousins, J. and Helps, A. (2004) *Behaviour in the Early Years: Tried and tested strategies*. London: David Fulton. **[Recommended]**
- Hutchinson, N. and Smith, H. (2004) *Intervening Early: Promoting positive behaviour in young children*. London: David Fulton.
- Mellor, N. (2001) Dealing with those pupils who crave recognition. *Early Years Educator*, 3, 18–20.
- McKeown, S. (2005) Nursery nightmares. *Special Children*, May/June, 20–22.
- Mukherji, P. (2001) *Understanding Children's Challenging Behaviour*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1999) *How to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Competence*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Welford, H. (2002) Look at me! *Right Start*, May/June, 21–23.

The website www.nmellor.com is a developing source of information on many aspects of attention seeking.