

PARENT HANDOUT: SHIFTING ATTENTION



WHAT IS SHIFTING ATTENTION?

- ▶ Shifting Attention is choosing to ignore *mild* misbehavior from your child, such as whining, sulking, complaining, or arguing, and to instead show your child approval for appropriate behaviors, such as following directions or rules.
- ▶ If you take your attention away from your child when they act in unwanted or inappropriate ways, they will learn these behaviors do not get a response, making them less rewarding. Over time, your child will engage in these behaviors less.
- ▶ At the same time, if you give your attention to your child when they act in appropriate or desired ways, your child will engage in these behaviors more.
- ▶ By Shifting Attention, your child learns that some behaviors consistently get attention (ones you like and are appropriate), while other behaviors consistently do not (ones you dislike and are inappropriate). This strategy works well when paired with the Praising Good Behavior strategy.
- ▶ This skill is effective with children of all ages when addressing mild misbehavior.

HERE'S HOW TO SHIFT ATTENTION AT HOME

- 1 **Choose the unwanted behaviors you want to ignore.** Shifting Attention works best with *mildly* inappropriate behaviors, such as when your child whines, sulks, complains, argues, talks back, asks the same question repeatedly, or does other things to get your attention.
- 2 When your child exhibits these behaviors, try to **intentionally shift your attention.** Ignore the behavior and avoid eye contact, look elsewhere for a few moments, start doing something else, or even leave the room for a few moments. This shows your child you are uninterested and unaffected by their misbehavior.
- 3 Be sure that when you shift attention, you still **pay close attention** to your child's behavior (so don't leave the room without returning!). That way, when your child stops misbehaving or begins behaving in ways you like, you notice it.
- 4 **Once your child behaves appropriately, show your immediate approval** by making eye contact, smiling, and telling your child what behavior you like (e.g., "It makes me happy when you sit quietly"; "I appreciate when you follow my instructions"). This encourages your child to do these things in the future. Look at Praising Good Behavior (Disruptive Behavior Skill 2) for more tips.
- 5 Some things **not to do** while Shifting Attention:
 - a Do not get pulled into talking, debating, or yelling at your child when unwanted behaviors occur. Re-explaining or justifying your behavior is still a way to give your child attention.
 - b Do not look or act upset. Do your best to hide your reaction so you appear calm and uninterested.
 - c Do not ignore moderate or severely inappropriate behaviors. Shifting Attention is not an effective response for hitting, kicking, cursing, threatening, throwing or breaking things, disobeying directions, or doing anything that is dangerous.
 - d Do not give up! When children don't get attention or stop getting attention, they often try harder to get it. This means what you're doing is working and your child is noticing the shift in your attention, so keep trying!



PARENT HANDOUT: SHIFTING ATTENTION TIPS



Disruptive Behavior Skill 3

HOW CAN SHIFTING ATTENTION HELP MY FAMILY?

- ▶ Parents often find it frustrating when children argue, complain, whine, or talk back. But, the more children act this way, the more attention parents usually give them.
- ▶ When a child gets attention for an unwanted behavior, it increases the chances of that behavior occurring again. If your child gets a toy after whining, she is more likely to whine in the future. If your child complains or argues with you until you clean up his mess or leave him alone, he is more likely to complain or argue to get out of other chores.
- ▶ Shifting Attention helps you pay less attention to mild misbehavior such as whining, complaining, sulking, talking back, or arguing. By ignoring these behaviors instead of responding to them, your child learns that these behaviors do not get your attention or lead to anything rewarding. Over time, your child will engage in these behaviors less.
- ▶ Shifting Attention helps you respond to your child's misbehavior in a more consistent and less frustrated or angry way. Using the power of your attention to its greatest potential is one of the most important and effective parenting tools you have at your disposal.

COMMON PARENT CONCERNS

This is hard! My child is stubborn and acting out more!

This usually means it's working, so don't give up! Children are smart and know that if they continue to misbehave, parents usually give in. When children are used to getting attention for certain behaviors and that attention goes away, it is normal for them to try harder. This is usually temporary and a sign to you to keep at it.

I feel guilty or uncomfortable ignoring my child.

With Shifting Attention, you are ignoring your child's *misbehavior*, not your *child*. You should keep a close eye on your child, and when they behave more appropriately, return to giving them attention and praise. This way you focus on giving your child attention for good behavior, increasing the chances of good behavior occurring more in the future.

What if my child really needs my attention?

You know your child best. There will be times your child has a genuine need that they may be expressing in an inappropriate way, like complaining about not feeling well. You will usually be able to tell if you need to respond to your child more strongly, or if you have an opportunity to teach your child to cope and seek attention in better ways.

If my child misbehaves, how long do I ignore the behavior?

Remember, the goal is to pay *less* attention to *mild* misbehavior and *more* attention to *good* behavior. When your child complains or whines, shift your attention in another direction. As soon as you see your child behaving in a way you like, shift your attention back to show your approval. If you can do this consistently, your child will quickly learn the difference between behaviors that get your attention (appropriate behavior) and those that *don't* (inappropriate or irritating behavior).