REINTEGREAT
EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

ATTENTION NEEDING

Reintegreat School Toolkit

Supporting Pupils with Attention Needing Behaviours

1. Introduction

Seeking attention is a natural and developmentally normal behaviour in children. For some pupils, however, it can become excessive or disruptive, affecting learning and relationships.

Children seek attention because:

- They may lack positive attention in other areas of life.
- Attention helps them feel important and valued.
- They may have learned that **negative attention is easier to achieve than positive attention**.
- Some become **"attention addicts"**, expecting high levels of adult focus due to early experiences.

📌 *Key Principle: All attention-seeking behaviour is a communication of need. Our task is to respond thoughtfully, not reactively.*

2. Types of Attention

- **Positive Attention** – praise, recognition, interest.
- **Negative Attention** – reprimands, ridicule, consequences.
- **No Attention** – being ignored or overlooked.

Children quickly learn to assess which type of attention is most available and adapt their behaviours accordingly.

3. Common Negative Attention-Seeking Behaviours

Often seen as "low-level disruption" but can significantly impact learning:

- Being silly, clowning, or disrupting peers.
- Interrupting others or calling out.
- Whining, tantrums, or overreacting.
- Playing the "victim" in disputes.
- Refusing or avoiding work; making deliberate mistakes.
- Lying or exaggerating.
- Frequent toileting or requests for help.
- Losing/forgetting belongings intentionally.
- Goading or instigating arguments.
- Ignoring instructions.

4. More Subtle Forms of Attention-Seeking

Some pupils use charm or compliance to gain adult focus:

- Bringing in extra work or gifts.

- Drawing pictures for staff daily.
- Over-offering to help in class instead of engaging with peers.
- Pushing to be “the perfect role model.”
- Finishing early to gain extra tasks.
- Seeking staff out outside lesson time.

⚠️ While positive on the surface, if persistent, this may signal **over-dependence or attachment concerns**.

5. “Attention Addicts”

Children who have consistently received unusually high levels of adult attention (e.g., only children, IVF babies, adopted children, children with health conditions, or children of anxious parents) may:

- Expect one-to-one adult focus as the norm.
- Struggle with independence and resilience.
- Form overly strong attachments to adults.

Support Strategies:

- Encourage and celebrate independence.
- Teach social awareness: attention must be shared.
- Scaffold sharing and turn-taking through games.
- Empathise if they dysregulate when attention is limited – explain why.
- Set clear boundaries around when and how attention is given.
- Work with parents/carers to align approaches and gradually reduce excessive attention.

6. Underlying Causes to Consider

When a child persistently seeks attention, consider:

- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence.
- Changes at home (new sibling, separation, bereavement, illness).
- Parent/carer mental health difficulties.
- Inequity of attention within the family (e.g., sibling with SEND).

7. Classroom Strategies

A. Relationship is Key

- Build a **trusting, consistent relationship**.
- Ensure the child feels emotionally connected and safe.

B. Tactical Ignoring

- Ignore minor, non-harmful behaviours if safe.
- Avoid reinforcing with attention (eye contact, comment, reprimand).
- Be consistent – ignored behaviours often initially increase before reducing.

C. Private Conversations

- Avoid public correction (which gives peer attention).

- Use positive phrasing:
    - Instead of: *“Stop swinging on your chair.”*
    - Try: *“I’d love to see you sitting safely in your chair.”*

D. Proximity Praise

- Praise peers nearby making good choices:
    - *“This table is trying really hard, well done Mary and Peter.”*
- Encourages the attention-seeking child to copy for positive recognition.

E. Random Positive Attention

Give small, unexpected moments of positive attention:

- Eye contact and a smile.
- Light touch on shoulder when passing.
- Short “check-in” conversation.
- Notes of praise in books or on desks.
- Giving small classroom jobs.
- Asking for their opinion in class.

Gradually **reduce random praise** as behaviours stabilise, reintroducing if regression occurs.

F. Positive Praise Systems

- Use **praise cards/tokens** across the class.
- Ensure the child sees that positive behaviours = recognition.
- Rotate who receives attention to prevent over-dependence.

8. Managing Staff Responses

- Remain calm despite frustration – children sense adult emotions.
- Recognise that **behaviours are developmentally normal**, but some persist due to unmet needs.
- Keep staff responses consistent across settings – mixed responses fuel attention cycles.

9. When to Escalate

If attention-seeking becomes:

- Obsessive, controlling, or linked to attachment difficulties.
- Persistent despite consistent strategies.
- Affecting the child’s emotional wellbeing or peer relationships.

➡️ Discuss with SENCo, behaviour leads, or safeguarding team.
➡️ Consider referral for additional emotional/mental health support.

10. Key Reminders for Staff

✅ All attention-seeking behaviour communicates an unmet need.
✅ Build positive relationships before addressing behaviours.
✅ Tactical ignoring and positive reinforcement are powerful.

✅ Private correction > public reprimand.
✅ Balance attention carefully – don't over-reward charm.
✅ Work with parents to align approaches.

11. Useful Guidance & Resources

- **DfE (2022): Behaviour in Schools**
- **DfE (2018, updated 2022): Mental Health & Behaviour in Schools**
- **Trauma-Informed Schools UK** – relational approaches
- **Young Minds**: www.youngminds.org.uk