

(N.B. for the most accurate version of this article see Assessment and Development Matters , 2(3), Autumn 2010, p.36-38)

Assessment issues in Attention Seeking and ADHD

Attention seeking

Enjoying the attention of others is quite socially acceptable. In some instances, however, the need for attention can lead to difficulties. The term attention seeking is used here to refer to 'excessive and inappropriate attention seeking'. Mellor's (2005) review of the topic firmly established the occurrence of the problem, its serious nature and the paradoxical lack of research into the area. Reports of the prevalence of attention seeking behaviour range from about 0.2 per cent to 7 per cent (Mellor, 2008).

There are many problems of definition. Mellor (2008) offers a working definition, as an aid to practitioners:

... attention seeking ... [refers] 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 (p.12).

Within the classification system of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM IV-TR (APA, 2000) the category that appears most likely to be able to accommodate attention seeking behaviour is 'parent-child relational problem: V61.20'. Unfortunately, attention seeking rarely appears in modern standardised instruments. Its roots are in interactions; it is not primarily a 'within child' problem.

ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, combined type)

ADHD is characterised by inattention, overactivity and impulsivity (APA, 2000). No attempt will be made to summarise the field here. It is, however, common experience that attention seeking can appear very similar to ADHD and, indeed, to other childhood difficulties. Concentrating on the confusion with ADHD, several points of difference can help to distinguish the two (for preliminary suggestions on resolving other confusions see Mellor, 2008, ch.11).

Distinguishing attention seeking from ADHD

When trying to distinguish the two problems these five pointers have an evidence base, although more research is called for.

1. The function of the behaviours

We need to consider not just a description of the behaviours giving concern, but their functions. Clarifying the functions of behaviours is time consuming and involves a 360 degree appraisal (see supplementary website and Mellor & Harvey, 2008). At the end of the process, the common function behind most of the behaviours observed – running around, screaming, throwing equipment, failing to work, etc. – should be seen to be to gain attention, in order to earn the description attention seeking.

2. Behaviours uniquely seen in attention seeking

Many behaviours will be common to both ADHD and attention seeking. Attention seeking tends, however, to include a range of 'bizarre or irritating' behaviours, which are not part of the ADHD pattern, such as seeing ghosts, pretend illnesses, stealing, repeatedly painting hair, constantly standing in front of mum's favourite TV programme, threatening to run away, silly noises or language, etc. The practitioner's job is to examine the adults' and children's reactions and tease out the underlying interactions common to all these 'irritating' behaviours. This procedure helps decide whether these are actually 'inappropriate' behaviours and part of an attention seeking pattern. As a caution, a child might, for instance, quite genuinely be ill and dealing with running away or self harm may be fraught with safety issues.

3. Good response to 'bad teaching'

ADHD can be managed well in class with carefully selected materials and teaching approaches. Children who seek attention, however, will generally settle to work quite happily, no matter how difficult or inappropriate the materials, or how poor the teaching style is, as long as they don't have to share the adult's attention with another child. A somewhat extreme, archetypical example is the child who will happily sit for

long periods while grandpa teaches ancient Greek, very badly. However, beware the pattern where the child's poor learning, often in one-to-one reading sessions at home, itself becomes a prime source of attention (see Mellor, 2000).

4. Social skills and language difficulties

ADHD is often associated with difficulties in social skills and language. Children with attention seeking behaviours will display a subtly different pattern. They may have social problems with most peers (because of their need to be centre of attention), but not with adults or younger children. Clues to this pattern may arise from typical parent comments such as 'He's great with the old lady next door and his baby niece'. In addition, attention seeking is usually accompanied by good language skills (particularly in the exquisite art of 'winding up' adults), whereas ADHD often involves poor language skills all round (see Mellor, 2008, 2009; Mellor & Harvey 2008). However, beware the occasional child who uses apparently poor language skills as another way of getting attention!

5. Variation between home and school, and between parents.

ADHD is associated with 'impairment ... in two or more settings' (APA, 2000). It is quite possible for attention seeking to display only at home, particularly in the primary age range. Another common feature in attention seeking is the striking difference in behaviour which can be noticed when the child is with one parent compared to the other (see Mellor & Harvey, 2008, ch.3 & 4).

There are many barriers to effective intervention, but when an appropriate programme is in place, the attention seeking behaviour can begin to change very quickly, even the same day. However, beware the common side effect of things getting worse before they get better (see Mellor & Harvey, 2008 ch.3). Ironically this is a sign of the programme working, not a sign of failure!

References

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