



# “ ATTENTION SEEKING ”

## September 2011

*A newsletter for all professionals fascinated by the puzzles and challenges of attention seeking. Resources, ideas, news and case study material.*

Past copies of the newsletter are on the website [www.nmellor.com](http://www.nmellor.com) under the heading “Attention seeking”

*Remember as social beings we all need some attention from others. What we are concerned with here is EXCESSIVE, INAPPROPRIATE attention seeking.*

### NEWS

► The **British Psychological Society** has published the article “*Assessment Issues in Attention Seeking and ADHD*” (in *Assessment and Development Matters*, 2(3), Autumn 2010 p.36-38). This follows up “*Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or attention seeking? Ways of distinguishing two common childhood problems*” (in *BJSE* 2009 vol. 36 no.1 p.26-35). These articles may be even more important in view of the (apparent) relaxation of the criteria for diagnosing ADHD, proposed for the new edition of the very influential *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM 5) which is due in 2013. Note that in the new manual, symptoms will only need to be present before age 12 and diagnosis can proceed without reports directly from teachers.

Keep up with DSM 5 on Google. Send your comments to the ADHD revision team via [www.dsm5.org](http://www.dsm5.org)

► The DVD training pack “**Managing attention seeking behaviour**” was distributed to many colleagues earlier this year. This pack contains video material and powerpoint to allow psychologists to present effective training courses to schools. We hope to be able to offer this directly to schools in the Autumn. Look out for an email.

[Send in your news about attention seeking](#)

### QUOTABLE QUOTES

From David Williams:

“ I'm terribly attention-seeking. It's very different once you get all this attention, though. Because then you want to control it. And you can't exactly. ”

### TOPICAL TOPICS

- To counter the trap of only focusing rewards on a small number of pupils, some schools have “always good” parties.
- A real-life example of managing (minor) attention seeking in High school is the video “Girl Talk” in the “Teaching with Bayley” series from Teacher’s TV [www.teachersmedia.co.uk/series/teaching-with-bayley](http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk/series/teaching-with-bayley)
- Praise and rewards have many pitfalls but can be effective even in High school with both younger pupils (see video “Love ’em or Loathe ’em” from “Teaching with Bayley” ) and older pupils (videos “Points mean prizes” and “Praise and Preparation” also from “Teaching with Bayley”).
- A teacher from a High school, working with a small, nurture, group of extremely attention seeking pupils explained in a recent workshop how he managed their constant demands. He said that, while respecting them appropriately for their age level generally, he found that he could most easily see how to meet their needs by viewing their emotional development (with regard to aspects of in-class behaviour and their need for constant attention) as closer to Junior school. This helped him to get the issue into perspective.

### THE LITTLE KNOWN HISTORY OF ALFRED ADLER

As we noted in previous Newsletters, Adler broke away from Freud to develop his own theory of human behaviour. Another important field of psychotherapy developed later, called LOGOTHERAPY (basically to do with searching for meaning). This approach was due to the work of Viktor Frankl who was much influenced by Adler. Adler published two books on meaning in the 1930s and claimed for example that “our reality is based on the meaning that we assign it” (p.7 in the 1994 edition of Adler’s “*What life could mean to you*”).

### WEB SITE

[www.nmellor.com](http://www.nmellor.com) is updated on a regular, but infrequent, basis. The web site also carries a number of publications on attention seeking that you can download from the “publications” page.

This site also links to a supplementary website with oodles more material on attention seeking e.g. explaining much more about understanding the *functions* of behaviour and also about problems with observation in class etc.

Visit [sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs](http://sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs) and choose “attention seeking” or “parents”

## RESEARCH IDEAS

Interest in attention seeking is growing, for example one teacher is studying the way in which attention seeking is viewed in the classroom, for his MA. Colleagues continue to ask about research topics. There are many. Here is one:

The very name “attention seeking” is a source of much controversy. There is no accepted definition. Many people dislike labels of any kind as they tend to hide the problem, and tend to over-simplify the complexity of each child’s needs. They can also be demeaning. In addition, it is not clear at what age it would be appropriate to start using such a label (see discussion in the book, “Attention seeking” chapters 1, 9 and 10)

Some colleagues prefer a phrase such as “attention needing”. The problem with attention needing is that it can be difficult to observe a “need” unless it is expressed in some way. And we all need some attention, because we are human. The point of the phrase “attention seeking” is to try to capture those instances where there are “excessive and inappropriate” attempts to get attention. The phrase “attention seeking” also seems to be commonly used by most of the population.

Some colleagues prefer the name “attention getting”. However, not all attempts to get attention are successful in actually getting attention. If one strategy fails, a child may switch to another way of seeking attention.

*Over to you for more research and comments!*

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## ATTENTION SEEKING ADULTS?

In Chekov’s “The Seagull”, Kostya shoots himself. As Gardner (in a Guardian review September 3 1997) points out “It’s certainly one way of guaranteeing he gets the attention of the actor’s mother who treats him like a tiresome pet”.

By some accounts, Lady Caroline Lamb is reported to have threatened to kill herself and Lord Byron, if he did not pay her attention. Such infatuation and individually-focused obsession, however, is perhaps rather different in quality to the kind of attention seeking which concerns us in schools.

Lewis (in “The Life and Death of Peter Sellers” 1994 p.33) describes how Peter Sellers dealt with his loneliness as a child, growing up with theatrical parents who travelled constantly:

*His first action, as a toddler, was to push a woman who was bending over the grate, into the fire, where she burned her hands. He spat on people’s heads and in their hats. He squashed a cat in a sofa bed. He’d show his parents up in cafe’s, eat the last cake without asking permission, and he’d dismember toys he had been bought. If ever he saw a march band he wanted to conduct it; and when he was taken to see Peter Pan.....he tried to jump off the balcony.*

Sellers may well have been attention seeking, by some definitions, but perhaps all the parents needed to do was spend time with him, rather than try to follow a programme of behaviour modification.

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## BUT BACK TO CHILDREN...

Instead of a case study, this issue will focus on some “round-up” discussions. We have had lengthy email contact with some colleagues about attention seeking and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (partly around chapter 11 of the book “Attention Seeking”) and also about inconsequential behaviour. Here are a few samples of the perspectives (edited with notes added):

### ***Autism Spectrum Disorder and attention seeking***

Chapter 11 of the book provides some evidence of what looks like attention seeking behaviour in children with ASD. This idea is strongly rejected by some colleagues. Here is a sample of views:

► I strongly believe “attention seeking” is a misrepresentation in relation to ASD, because of its negative connotations when used in schools to describe behaviour. In my opinion, it would be more appropriate to describe [the issue] as seeking to interact / communicate or to initiate a predictable response (appropriate or otherwise, even if aversive to the person initiating the response).

► What I object to is the generality of this descriptor “attention seeking”, which can lead to the response “withdraw attention” to extinguish the behaviour, rather than examine the function of it. It is important to do a functional analysis so that a more specific definition can be generated [N.B. the supplementary website explores functional analysis]. The chapter highlights “lack of skills” in social interaction etc. and the case of a child who liked the attention of being chased. In my experience this is quite common in children with ASD and SLD who have very poor play skills and enjoy games of chase. Running away elicits a predictable response from adults and becomes an exciting game.

I have also observed children drawn to an aversive stimulus to trigger a reaction, e.g. approach another child who will hit them for invading personal space. At the time, they may show increased anxiety and it appears that they are trying to control the response by provoking it. The latter is also often linked to sensory seeking behaviours and hyper / hypo sensitivity. It is very easy for one behaviour (say tipping liquids) to become linked to a reaction from an adult that is just as exciting as the original action. Hence “throwing things over the fence” [referring to the book chapter] may

have originally been done for its own sake, but has quickly become linked to the “exciting” reaction from the people inside the house. It’s like flicking a switch, simple cause and effect without responsibility.

► This is an issue which concerns me. I have had a couple of cases recently where diagnosis was not given initially because of “attention seeking”, which the Psychiatrists seemed to feel [were] linked to attachment problems and therefore ruled out ASD - only much later was a diagnosis given, after years of stress and anxiety for the families. To me it seems much less clear cut and this “either / or” approach seems to be based upon a theoretical assumption rather than practical experience of knowing and working with people with an ASD and their families. Recently I have come across a new diagnosis: Pathological Demand Avoidance - PDA which adds further to this conundrum. When I met this child with “PDA type autism” he seemed to me to be displaying classic extreme attention seeking, manipulative and controlling behaviour - the family seemed to excuse this and accept that nothing could be done because of his “PDA”. Yet he did have some ASD type features.

► They [children with ASD] definitely do exhibit attention seeking behaviour but [with] subtle differences and are we in fact looking at the same thing or something different linked either to an obsessive interest that they desire to share with everyone as opposed to discuss anything else. Or, if they become fascinated or very dependant on another person adult or child. Friendships are frequently to the exclusion of everyone else in their eyes. Clarity would need to be in the definition of “attention seeking” I would have thought.

*Over to you for more research and comments! I have not attempted any summary as the topic is clearly open to much more discussion.*

## TV SNIPPETS

Thursday July 28 ITV 7.30

TONIGHT: Chemical Cosh for Kids

“ School noticed Ryan’s behaviour changed around the same time that baby Shane arrived... all the attention is going to the baby... it’s not quite clear... who’s giving Ryan positive attention, if anyone. ”

## Inconsequential behaviour and attention seeking

My original email that kicked off the discussion:

One colleague felt that descriptions of attention seeking could easily be descriptions of inconsequential behaviour. My feeling is that the two can readily be distinguished. Inconsequential behaviour is, by its very title I assume, behaviour that continues despite consequences. Attention seeking on the other hand is very determined by consequences: the behaviour is maintained by the attention it receives. This can be observed in interactions in class or at home (a full assessment is of course a lengthy and complex process, which we can discuss at a later date). If no attention is forthcoming, the attention seeking behaviour should eventually diminish.

Of course, in practice there may be hiccups and things may get worse before they get better. And we have to be very well organised in how we go about not giving attention (it is much harder than it sounds) and what else is included in an effective package of approach. And finally, to complicate matters, in a (?) small number of cases inconsequential behaviour and attention seeking may exist side by side.

### *A sample of replies and comments from colleagues (edited, with notes added):*

► Ideally, carers and teachers could aim first to ensure that the child’s needs for attention and attachment are met, hopefully thereby reducing the demands in the first place - although the child’s behaviour makes this very difficult. So often those we work with misunderstand what we mean by “tactical ignoring” and just ignore everything, especially the good behaviour (or pretend to ignore but still get steamed up and show their reactions, the classic “I’m going to ignore you now Freddie” scenario). I guess it’s for this reason that Caroline Webster Stratton phrases it differently in her advice to parents and teachers - PRAISE and REWARD (with attention) the behaviour you WANT, not the behaviour you don’t want.

Once people realise they are actually rewarding poor behaviour and ignoring the positive it can be an eye opener. She also wisely says “the children who need our attention the most, ask for it in the most inappropriate of ways”. However it is very difficult for families and teachers who are already locked in to a negative cycle of mutually reinforcing behaviour with such a child to begin to get a new perspective and begin do something differently - which is why the Webster Stratton / Incredible Years workshops take so many weeks - she also builds in positive choices and consequences to deal with the negative behaviours that can’t safely be ignored [N.B. the book goes into some depth about problems with ignoring].

► [When we] describe a child's behaviour as "attention seeking" ... there seems to be an implication of blaming the child - i.e. the child is being deliberately manipulative and mendacious - another, more "professional" word for "naughty" basically... I also think the hope of some teachers is that, by using the term "attention seeking", the simple urge to remove the challenging child from the class gains more legitimacy - the power of LABELS eh?

► I'm in agreement with [the] point about the purpose of attention-seeking (or attention needing?). The literature on looked after children, adoption, trauma, abuse, neglect and loss, offers an alternative view, that ignoring is likely to be an inappropriate strategy for change, if not a downright harmful one, for a significant number of children experiencing fear and uncertainty in relationships with meaningful and /or primary care givers. Ignore it at your peril!

#### ***My final reply, trying to tie matters up a bit:***

1. To begin with, please accept an apology. I started this discussion at a rather random point - one that just happened to come up in recent discussions, concerning inconsequential behaviour. We really need to go back to the very beginnings of the topic. I'll try to do this in a couple of postings [later], to save confusion, if you will bear with me.

2. There are many very important issues, for example to do with: The causes of attention seeking (sticking with that somewhat controversial label for now - we can maybe discuss labels later). How we identify the problem and distinguish attention seeking from other issues. Why and how we might label it (as several of you point out, labels can be demeaning). What, if anything, we should do about it and how we go about this. For simplicity, I'll leave most of these to one side for now.

3. A major aspect is to do with identification. Using a crude caricature, to highlight the issues: [if the advice is] jump in with both feet to start a behavioural programme at the first sign of something that appears to be attention seeking, this is of course wrong, on many levels.

As with any reported "problem", a thorough assessment is required. I have tried to describe the challenges of a full assessment in a couple of pieces of writing. I like the idea of a "360 degree appraisal" and "progressive focusing" using a wide variety of sources (observation; direct discussions with child, carers and teachers; existing documents).

Each of these aspects is, however, full of potential pitfalls (e.g. the "vanishing problem" in observation; the long-standing but often un-noticed patterns of behaviour hidden in the case file; the adults' and children's sensitivities etc).

However, even if something resembling "attention seeking" can be reliably observed, it is of course vital to

explore alternative explanations. A wide variety of other issues must of course be ruled out e.g. bullying, social skills problems, neglect, learning difficulties, etc. Even our sometimes maligned psychometrics can help, for example, in identifying un-recognized learning problems.

Further discussion of assessment is covered in chapters 1 and 2 of the book "Attention seeking: a complete guide for teachers". Also please visit the web site [sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs](http://sites.google.com/site/nigelsbitsandbobs) (visit the page "attention seeking" for discussion of functions, observation, working with children and teachers). Also chapter 4 of the manual "Helping parents deal with attention seeking behaviour" (this is a free download from the page called "parents" on the same website).

4. What term we finally use for the "problem", and what we do about it, we can maybe look at later.

5. So, to sum up. In trying to answer some of your very legitimate concerns, a first step is to make absolutely sure there aren't other reasons for the reported "behaviour difficulty" which need to be dealt with. Clearly, to use a somewhat extreme example - simply to emphasise my agreement with the concerns raised - if children in a bleak, neglectful, oppressive Romanian orphanage are reported to be "attention seeking", it is the orphanage that needs to change. And the same sort of argument, maybe in a milder form, applies in this country, for [some settings]. I don't think we are in disagreement here.

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Nigel Mellor, 2011.