



SELECTIVE ATTENTION, STRATEGIC IGNORING

Child Development and Rehabilitation Center
Oregon Health & Science University



Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health therapist if needed.

Young children are highly motivated by a variety of things. Perhaps one of the most motivating is attention/reactions from their parents. Fortunately, most of the time, children do nice things to get their parents to notice them, such as coloring pictures, creating games, or generally being silly and playful. Parents acknowledge, fawn over, and generally act pleased when their children show such positive, prosocial behaviors.

Unfortunately, there are other times when children misbehave and they are motivated to get a reaction from parents, get their parent's "goat" or otherwise send their parent through the roof. Children may be upset about a limit that was set, cranky because they were denied their own way, or generally just irritable about daily events.

Selective Attention—Enhancing “Time In”

Wow, I really like that. Do more! Parents can really capitalize on children's motivation to please them and seek positive affirmation. To do so, parents are encouraged to increase “Time In” when their children are being good.

- Catch your child being good. Look for any instance of positive, prosocial behavior that you would like to see continue or more of from your child. When your child behaves this way, make sure you acknowledge it some how (e.g., praise, pats on the head).
- Use physical “time in,” including hugs, kisses, pats on the back, tussles of the hair, sitting close to your child, and so on. Most young kids love this sort of attention.
- Use Labeled Praise to point out what you really like about your child's behavior.
- Look for positive behavior that is opposite of misbehavior (e.g., picking up toys when told vs. noncompliance) and make sure you focus on the positive behavior.

Strategic Ignoring

That's not nice! I'm outta here! Many common misbehaviors that children show are bothersome, but are not likely to cause any harm to the your child, you, or others around. Things that fall into this category are often called “Annoying/Obnoxious” misbehaviors. Examples of common misbehaviors in this category include whining, pouting, crying, tantruming, and so on. These occur for a variety of reasons, including being upset about a limit set or an expectation put forth or being denied something or some activity that they want. Parents are often tempted to verbally reprimand, scold, reason, or otherwise talk/react to their children when they display Annoying/Obnoxious behavior. However, this might accidentally be rewarding/motivating to the child because some attention is better than no attention in their world.

Instead, using Strategic Ignoring is recommended for many Annoying/Obnoxious behaviors. Doing so involves the following:

- Identifying behaviors that might be motivated to get reactions from you. Several examples are listed above. Most often, these misbehaviors are verbal in nature (e.g., whining, pouting, swearing, cursing, tantruming without physical acting out) and by reacting to them, parents are adding “fuel to the fire.”
- Identify behaviors that are not likely to stop by ignoring them. For example, sneaking cookies from the cupboard most likely will not stop if you ignore it because getting the cookies is rewarding!
- Strategic Ignoring involves:
 - Turning your back when your child swears
 - Avoiding arguing with your child about why they need to comply, and instead restating the instruction
 - Not lecturing your child about swearing, but instead walking away from her until it stops
 - Setting a limit and then enforcing it, without answering your child’s multiple questions about why s/he can’t have that object or do that activity.
 - Being okay with letting your child scream in the grocery store line because he wants a candy bar and NOT giving it to him or repeatedly scolding him.
- When using Strategic Ignoring, it is very important that you look for the first instance of positive, prosocial behavior that your child displays after you started ignoring and then responding to that with positive Selective Attention.

What To Expect When Using Selective Attention And Strategic Ignoring

- 1) Expect that your child will become increasingly motivated to please you. By increasing “time in” you are teaching your child what you like about their behavior and strengthening the parent-child bond. When children feel closer to their parents, they want to do more to please them.
- 2) Expect that it is hard to catch your child being good. Many parents see times when their child is playing quietly or generally behaving as an opportunity for some “me time.” Instead, it’s the perfect time to use selective attention strategies.
- 3) Expect Annoying/Obnoxious behavior to get worse before it gets better. By decreasing or eliminating reactions to these types of behavior, you are making a change in your parenting that will be noticeable to your child. Nobody really likes change, and so we react. Your child will persist with whining, pouting, or tantrums in order to see what it takes to get you to react. **Don’t Give In!** If you can make it through this test, you will be better off in the long run.
- 4) If you know you are in a situation that you will be unable to tolerate increasing/escalating Annoying/Obnoxious behavior, then it’s better to give in early rather than waiting for your child to escalate. This might seem odd. However, if you try to use Strategic Ignoring and then you give in while your child has escalated his/her annoying/obnoxious behavior, then you’ve taught your child that they just have to persist and escalate to get what they want. The next time you use Strategic Ignoring, things will be even worse. So, if you’re going to give in, give in early.