

Critical Comments Flow Freely from Parents

by Kathy Slattengren

Do you make more positive comments or negative comments to your children? If you're like most parents, you make a lot more negative comments than positive ones. In her book, [Building Moral Intelligence](#), Dr. Michele Borba writes "studies reveal that the average parent makes 18 critical comments to his child for every one positive comment."

Really? Could we really be making that many critical comments to our children? In their article, "[Why Our Kids Are Out of Control](#)", Azerrad and Change report "Glenn Latham, Ed.D., a family and educational consultant, has found that adults typically ignore 90 percent or more of the good things children do. Instead, they pay attention to children when they behave badly."

Sadly the research clearly indicates that parents easily fall into the habit of paying more attention to misbehavior than good behavior.

Getting Attention for Misbehavior

Whenever you find yourself yelling at your kids or nagging them, you're focusing on the behavior you don't want. Statements like these focus on children's misbehavior:

- "Stop whining!"
- "Don't look at me that way."
- "You're wasting time - now get going on your homework."
- "Quit your fighting!"
- "Don't lie to me."

By giving attention to misbehavior, we actually increase the chance that the misbehavior will be repeated. This isn't what we want!

One example comes from a mom in one of my parenting classes who was complaining about how her 2-year-old son was driving her crazy with his screaming. Whenever he was frustrated, he would scream at the top of his lungs. Typically she would stop whatever she was working on, go find him and help him resolve the problem. She found it especially irritating when she was busy preparing dinner and he kept interrupting her with his screaming.

After reflecting on the situation, she realized the attention she was giving him for his screaming was actually encouraging him to do it more often. This was the opposite of what she wanted! Her new plan was to periodically go find him when he wasn't screaming and compliment him on his behavior. She also decided to ignore his screams of frustration. This new approach worked far better!

Paying Attention to Good Behavior

Since paying attention to our children's good behavior doesn't seem to come naturally to most of us, it's going to take effort to do this. We need to specifically watch for our children to behave well and then acknowledge it.

There are many ways to reward good behavior:



- A light touch on the shoulder, a quick back rub
- A smile, hug or kiss
- Saying "Thank you."
- Kind words, words of encouragement

Statements like these acknowledge children's good behavior:

- "I noticed that you put away the puzzle after you were done playing with it. That was great."
- "I heard you practicing your trumpet. It's really sounding good."
- "I appreciated how you held my hand when we crossed that busy street."
- "Thanks for helping set the table."
- "I love how well you're sharing the markers."

By pointing out our children's good behavior, we will be encouraging their appropriate behavior while filling our homes with more positive energy. This is just what we want!

Give Attention to Behaviors You Want to Increase

Children crave attention and when they can't get positive attention they will go for negative attention. Our job is to make sure we're giving them so much positive attention that they don't need to misbehave to get attention!

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