

Living With Children

By John Rosemond
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One of the more difficult facts for today's parents, as a rule, to wrap their heads around is the...I'll say it again, with emphasis... FACT that children do not need (as a general rule) a lot of attention.

I was there, working as a journeyman psychologist in a community mental health center, when the children-need-lots-of-attention myth had its genesis. The professional consensus at the time (early 1970s) was that any persistent inappropriate behavior was a "cry for attention." Said another way, the parents of the child in ques-

tion were depriving him of feeling that the universe had been eagerly anticipating his arrival ever since the Big Bang. The parents in question were irresponsible, neglectful; at best, lazy.

This myth lives on in the form of mommy-guilt. An all-too-typical mom recently told me that if she even sits down for a moment during the day to catch her breath, she almost immediately begins to feel that she's being selfish, that she should be doing something (anything will do) for her kids - yet another example of how bad parenting advice from

mental health professionals has greatly increased the perceived need for mental health professional advice.

Today, the child who seems to need constant attention is interpreted as a "high needs" child, as if he was born that way when the FACT is that the child is an attention-addict. He was not born an attention-addict but became such by virtue of being given entirely too much attention on demand. He demanded and he received, so he demanded more and received more; thus did his sense of well-being become attached to the notion that unless he is the center of attention, something is amiss in his world.

Children need freedom - the freedom to explore, imagine, create, take

things apart and put things together. This freedom requires boundaries, of course, but providing them in the context of an environment that encourages exploration, etc., is more important by far than giving lots of attention. Meeting a child's need for freedom-within-boundaries minimizes the possibility that the child will ever act (in the absence of emergencies or other unusual circumstances) "starved" of attention.

Children need to feel responsible; thus, they need responsibilities. A child's role in his family - how he "fits" into his family - is defined by responsibilities. "These are your chores" is the same as saying, "These are tangible evidences of how you are important around here."

Children need to feel safe. They need to feel as if they will be adequately protected and provided for under any and all circumstances; that they have "nothing to worry about." In order to feel safe, they need adequate supervision, but at a certain point, supervision becomes micro-management and children need anything but that.

Because they are not fundamentally oriented to do the right thing - but rather, the self-serving thing - children need unconditional love. If love was conditional, lots of children would receive very little. Children need to know that no matter how badly they behave, they are cherished.

Because of what I said in the preceding paragraph, children need unequivocal authority as much as they

need unconditional love. The Beatles were wrong: love is not enough.

And yes, children need attention, but like most things that begin as needs (e.g. water and food), the giving of attention involves a point of diminishing returns at which the attention being given becomes detrimental, even toxic. It becomes equated, in the child's mind, with love. At that point, the child begins to feel "safe" only when he is the center of attention, which he begins to seek in increasingly inappropriate ways.

Indeed, this can quickly become a mental health problem, but beware involving mental health professionals.

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