

**Joanne Austin**  
**Area Family Living Agent**  
**WSU Cooperative Extension**  
**360-428-4270**

## **CHILDREN THRIVE ON ATTENTION**

Children thrive on adult attention. They need it. In fact, most children will do almost anything to get it -- good or bad.

Children who receive praise and attention for positive behaviors are likely to continue acting in desirable ways. On the other hand, those who get attention when they misbehave learn that irritating and inappropriate actions work best for getting attention.

Parents and those caring for children can use this information to their benefit. To encourage positive behavior catch children in the act of "being good" and doing things such as sharing, cleaning up after themselves, and helping others. It may even be necessary to ignore them "being bad", unless the behavior is aggressive or dangerous.

Use some of the following ideas to help children develop positive behaviors:

- **BE SPECIFIC WITH PRAISE.** Saying, "Mary, you put all your art materials away. I like that. Thank you." Lets Mary know what specific actions got your approval. Telling her she is "a good girl" does not reinforce her appropriate care of the art materials. Research indicates that children who are praised for specific behaviors become better problem solvers.
- **DON'T DILUTE COMPLIMENTS.** What if Mary put the art materials away, but forgot to wipe the paint off the table. Instead of criticizing her, allow her to feel good about the praise and her accomplishment. Remind her to wipe off the table at another time.
- **LOOK FOR THE GOOD.** Most people tend to be programmed to see bad behaviors and attempt to correct them. Instead re-program and look for the good. The more these behaviors are praised, the more likely they are to be repeated.
- **BE HONEST WITH APPROVAL.** Children know when adults are sincere and when they are not. They need to be able to trust the adults in their lives. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Avoid gushing over something if you really don't like it.
- **NOTICE THE EFFORT.** Most children are enthusiastic about learning a new skill, but can easily get discouraged along the way. Noticing and encouraging small steps help children stay on track and enjoy the process.

How we respond to the behavior of children is key in how they choose to behave. The behaviors that are noticed and encouraged are often the ones that grow and last.